THE MAD MAGICIAN

Maxwell Grant

"Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows!" That is the opening of the radio program about the most famous pulp magazine detective ever created. Maxwell Grant single-handedly wrote 283 novels about the Shadow from 1931 to 1949.

The Shadow is not the only crime fighter about whom Grant wrote. For Crime Busters, *a Street and Smith magazine first published in December 1937, he created Norgil the Magician. The suave, handsome, and mustached conjuror appeared in a series of stories that never approached the success of the Shadow tales, but consistently ranked among the magazine's most popular features.*

"The Mad Magician" was first published in the July 1938 issue of Crime Busters; *it has never before appeared in book form. Filled with action and colloquial speech, it is typical of the Norgil stories and, in fact, of most pulp fiction. Its background of magic is absolutely authentic, which should come as no surprise. Maxwell Grant is a pseudonym of Walter B. Gibson, one of the world's greatest real-life prestidigitators.*

A white rabbit poked its head from the silk hat, took a look at the audience and twitched its whiskers.

The audience laughed. Norgil didn't. For that hat wasn't a borrowed one. It was Norgil's own, one he had just handed to Miriam as he began his act. Producing rabbits was Norgil's specialty—but the bunnies always came from borrowed hats, never from his own.

Moreover, the rabbit wasn't one of Norgil's. He had run out of white rabbits and had been trying to get some new ones ever since he reached town.

The magician's neatly mustached face was grim as he looked at Miriam. Worry showed in the expression of the trim brunette. She could read Norgil's thoughts. He was cursing himself for ever sending his valuable assistant, Fritz, on that mission tonight and letting Miriam take responsibility for preparing the act.

Yet she had done it before, and handled things well. But something was radically wrong now. Miriam was as much surprised as Norgil. Both were wondering how the rabbit had gotten into the hat, and where it had come from in the first place!

Misgivings became a nightmare. The rabbit merely prefaced other unexpected things that happened. Miriam came forward with a dove and paper bag. Norgil shoved the bird into the bag and gestured toward an empty cage held by another assistant. He then fired a revolver shot and exploded the paper bag.

The dove was gone. The trick had worked all right, provided the dove had reappeared in the cage. But the audience saw the cage before Norgil had a chance to look for it, and the spectators howled gleefully.

A bird had appeared in the cage, sure enough, but it wasn't a dove! Norgil saw the assistant gawking at a bantam rooster, which was wagging its beak in an effort to voice an indignant crow.

Muttering to himself, Norgil faked a smile in response to the laughter that rolled in from every cranny of the theater. If the crowd out front thought the comedy was intended, Norgil was ready to make the best of it. Unfortunately, other tricks weren't due for the same hilarious finish.

Assistants wheeled a trunk on the stage. Norgil showed the trunk to be empty, and the audience could see beneath the platform on which the trunk stood. Suavely, the magician asked the audience to choose one flag from those of several nations. The choice was "Holland." Norgil bowed, waiting while the other flags were carried off, then he turned toward the trunk.

The magician held his revolver. All he needed was Miriam's cue that she was ready; then, a blank shot would bring her from the trunk, clad in Dutch attire from winged hat to wooden shoes. It was lucky that Norgil waited for that cue. It didn't come.

Instead, there was Miriam's plaintive whisper as she poked the trunk lid a half inch upward, "I can't come out! I haven't any costume!"

Norgil beckoned savagely toward the wing. Curtains closed in, while the audience guffawed at the failure of the trunk trick. Close to the footlights, Norgil tried to fill the gap with some sure-fire card tricks, while an assistant reorganized the show. But the card tricks nearly wrecked the act entirely.

When Norgil yanked the pack from his pocket, and began to change the spots by passing his hand over the cards, he found that he had a deck of blanks. Only his own daze saved him, for when the spectators saw his stupefied look, they thought he was clowning more than ever.

Then the curtains parted. More tricks were ready, and someone had set them straight. Mechanically, Norgil moved into his routine and finished the show amid remnants of laughter. When the curtains finally closed, he shook off some helpers who were swearing that they didn't know why things had gone wrong.

It wasn't the time for alibis or apologies. Those could come later. For the present, Norgil wanted the seclusion of his dressing room.

He reached it, sliding his dress coat from his shoulders and ripping off his white tie and collar. He plopped into a chair before his dressing table and switched on bright lights around the mirror, preparatory to removing his make-up.

Planting his elbows on the dressing table, Norgil propped his chin in both hands, to steady his whirling thoughts. Then, swiftly, he was leaning forward, eyes intent.

There on the mirror before his gaze, letters had formed themselves. Dark, scrawly letters, and they made the three words:

READ THE CARD

Norgil tilted his head sideways and his smile returned. To another this final happening might have seemed a further link in a chain of inexplicable incidents. But not to Norgil. The message written on the mirror simply proved that someone had deliberately gummed the act, and had topped off the procedure with a very old stunt.

The message had been written in secret ink, but heat from the electric-light bulbs had again made the writing visible.

Instructions to "read the card" did not puzzle Norgil. He dug in his pocket, brought out the blank pack that someone had planted there. Among the fifty-odd blanks, the magician found one card with a message in green ink, as scribbly as the writing on the mirror. It read:

> You will pardon my interference with your splendid act. I did it to acquaint you with the clever methods which I, a fellow magician, possess. I have many tricks that will interest you. Wait in your dressing room until you receive a call from me.
>
> Professor Caradoc

Norgil had never heard of Professor Caradoc, but he was convinced that the mystery man must certainly have some clever methods.

At the bottom of the card, Professor Caradoc had added: P.S. Heat this card and learn more.

To Norgil, the postscript indicated that Professor Caradoc had written something else, using lemon juice, which would remain invisible until the card was heated. As though to humor the absent professor, Norgil gave a smile, struck a match and held it beneath the card.

Three seconds later, Norgil was convinced that Professor Caradoc was quite as clever as he claimed. No more writing appeared along with the greenish ink.

Instead, the card gave a sudden crackle and vanished in a sheet of instantaneous flame, from between Norgil's fingertips!

II

Norgil was dressed in street clothes when Miriam knocked on the dressing-room door. At the magician's instruction, she came in, tears in her lovely eyes. She started to say, "I'm sorry about the show. I—I can't understand—"

Norgil stepped quickly forward and patted the girl's arm. A smile was again on his face, as he said, "It was not your fault, Miriam. It was all a ruse played on me, something I've learned about since returning here to the dressing room. It's funny, though, that I didn't see this person around before the performance—"

"There was someone!" Miriam interjected quickly. "An old fellow with whiskers, roaming around backstage. He looked harmless, and nobody chased him—"

Norgil's deft fingers snapped. "Then that could have been Professor Caradoc!" he exclaimed. "He must have—" The magician broke off as his phone rang. It was a handset on a side table.

When he lifted the receiver, a wheezy voice spoke across the wire, introducing the talker as Professor Caradoc. The mystery man was profuse with apologies for the way he had first introduced himself. But he trusted that Norgil would forgive him, and pay an immediate visit to Caradoc's home.

"You must come alone"—the wheezy voice was almost fearful—"otherwise I cannot admit you. I am mistrustful of strangers, since most of them wish to steal the secrets of my marvelous creations. But you are an important man, Mr. Norgil. I feel that I can talk with you freely."

"All right, sir," agreed Norgil, glancing at Miriam. "I'll come. Tell me the address and I'll be over right away."

Caradoc gave the address and Norgil hung up. He glanced at his watch.

"That was the old fellow you mentioned, all right," he told the girl. "He's harmless, so I'm going over to see him. I'll be back by eight o'clock, in time for the evening show—"

Miriam looked suddenly worried. "You've forgotten about Jenrick," she reminded the magician. "He's coming to the hotel at eight o'clock. You have an appointment with him."

The girl assistant was correct. Jenrick was a big money man from Chicago, and Norgil had been talking about the man for the past two weeks. Jenrick desired to form a partnership with the magician and start on a round-the-world tour. His promises had increased with every letter, until finally tonight's appointment had been made.

Norgil pulled a thick stack of letters from the pocket of the suit he had put on. "Here's Jenrick's correspondence," he told Miriam. "I brought the letters over from the hotel. Take them with you, and wait at the hotel until Jenrick arrives. I plan to be back there before him, but if I should be a few minutes late, keep him there until I return."

"Perhaps you'd rather have Fritz attend to it?" asked the assistant.

Norgil shook his head. "I sent Fritz on an errand. He was to call me, and hasn't. You'll have to wait for Jenrick."

Miriam ventured a question as she took the letters. She had heard much of Norgil's talk about Jenrick, and had a woman's natural curiosity. "How much is Jenrick willing to put up, boss?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," replied Norgil. "Provided that I can get ten thousand of my own. I have that much stowed away in the bank account.

"That's one reason"—the magician added a wise smile—"why I'm going to visit the old duck who just phoned me. We'll need some new stage illusions, if we start the world tour, and I think the old fellow has them."

Miriam agreed that it would be a good selling point with Jenrick. Norgil handed the girl a checkbook to carry along with the letters. With another glance at his watch, he left the dressing room, after reminding Miriam to be at the hotel in time to meet Jenrick.

A taxi took the magician to Caradoc's address. It wasn't a long trip, but the driver had some trouble picking the right house. The street was bumpy. The house itself was a grimy brick structure that formed part of an old row.

Most of the other houses were empty, and there were no lights visible in Caradoc's place. Despite the dusk, Norgil made out drawn blinds and shuttered windows that indicated the place was occupied.

Evidently, Professor Caradoc was something of a recluse who had chosen this shabby neighborhood as one that offered sure seclusion. Calculating thus, Norgil dismissed the cab and mounted the stone steps of the two-story house.

The magician rang the bell three times during the next few minutes. Each time there was a faint clang in response. Finally, rusted bolts were drawn. A crack of light came from within when the door inched open. Norgil sensed the observation of peering eyes. The door swung inward.

Stepping into a tiny, lighted vestibule, Norgil saw no one for the moment. Then a figure popped into view from behind the door itself. Norgil saw a tall but stooped form, the back of a bald head, as the man shut the door. He watched scrawny fingers thrust the bolts shut.

The man turned around. Norgil met the gaze of tiny, brilliant eyes that formed the only life in a hollow-cheeked face which had saffron skin, drawn as tight as the surface of a snare drum. From dryish lips came a tone that was no longer wheezy, but harsh:

"I am Professor Caradoc."

When Norgil stared, Caradoc chuckled. The professor drew his long-nailed fingers over his smooth chin.

"You thought I had a beard," clucked Caradoc. "I did, this afternoon, but it was a false one. Remember"—his voice thinned to a whisper as his bony forefinger tapped Norgil's shoulder—"that I must always be cautious.

"The ideas in this brain"—the finger rose to tap Caradoc's bald forehead—"are valuable, very valuable. It is seldom that I choose to allow visitors here."

The whisper ended. There was a momentary pause; then Caradoc's voice was harsh again as he questioned: "How long can you stay?"

Norgil consulted his watch. It was quarter past seven. That eight o'clock appointment could wait fifteen minutes, even when a man as important as Stephen Jenrick was concerned. Norgil said, "One hour."

There was pleasure in Caradoc's withery smile. The old professor stepped through to the hallway, beckoning for Norgil to follow.

As he crossed that inner threshold, Norgil the magician embarked upon the strangest hour of his life.

III

To Norgil, the basement room where Professor Caradoc conducted him was quite as fabulous as Ali Baba's cave. It was not stocked with jewels; instead, it contained objects that Norgil regarded as far more priceless—magical apparatus and stage pieces that Norgil had read about, but believed were no longer in existence. All were housed in the one huge room which occupied the entire basement.

There, Norgil saw old-fashioned tables fitted with mechanical devices. He eyed a life-size devil's head that grimaced, and thrust playing cards from its mouth and horns when Caradoc made it operate.

In one corner, Caradoc had a miniature theater, where a curtain rose and a tiny, mechanical magician performed tricks that worked automatically, with other little dolls as its assistants.

Professor Caradoc was pleased at Norgil's interest in these curios from the past. As the visitor examined them, Caradoc recounted their history, stating the ridiculous prices at which he had purchased the various pieces of apparatus. For forty years, he declared, this collection had been his hobby. He had traveled abroad and had been fortunate enough to pick up many items that would otherwise have been junked as worthless by persons who had inherited them.

It wasn't long, however, before Caradoc tried to draw Norgil's attention to newer paraphernalia of the professor's own invention. It was a wrench for Norgil to drop his interest in the old tricks, but he finally managed it.

Caradoc took him to a square-topped table that had a toy sofa on it. He placed a small doll upon the couch, pressed a button in the table. Mechanism buzzed; the doll rose a few inches in the air and wavered there.

"A genuine levitation!" enthused Caradoc. "Done by electromagnetism! This is only the model. If it were built on a large scale" —he spread his arms with a long sweep—"a living woman could be floated in mid-air!"

Norgil shook his head.

"It won't work, professor," he declared. "You couldn't hoist a girl half a foot by that system. The lifting power of an electromagnet decreases too rapidly in proportion to distance."

Caradoc looked disappointed. He turned off the motor, beckoned Norgil to the back of the room. The magician viewed an oblong cabinet, set upright, and topped by the shoulders and head of a life-size figure that seemed to emerge from the box itself.

The shoulders were draped with a silken garment, the white throat of the wax image girded by a jeweled necklace. Long, dark hair draped from head to shoulders, while the face itself was partly concealed by a thin, curtainlike veil.

"The Veiled Isis," explained Caradoc. "The figure smiles, moves its eyes, even speaks!"

He lifted the veil to show the waxwork face behind it. The features were exquisitely molded and had a lifelike appearance. Professor Caradoc was ready to start the automaton in operation, when Norgil halted him.

"Too much like the Golem," explained the magician, "an illusion that I used a few years ago and finally put in storage. Sorry, professor."

"But you can open the cabinet," persisted Caradoc, "and show it empty."

"I know," smiled Norgil. "You could do the same with the Golem illusion."

Caradoc opened the cabinet anyway. It wasn't empty as he claimed. Something black jumped out of it, as surprisingly as the white rabbit had popped from Norgil's hat. Norgil gave a quick recoil, then laughed.

The thing was a black cat that had been asleep in the Isis cabinet. It was a big cat, and playful, once it had been roused. It stood on its hind legs and began to claw at the velvet fringes of a table.

"Stop it, Gandhi!" snapped Caradoc. "You'll overturn things as you did before!"

Gandhi didn't stop until Norgil coaxed him by wiggling his fingers near the cat's nose. Thus attracted, Gandhi was lured to a telephone cord in the corner of the room, where he played unmolested.

Professor Caradoc was lifting the top of the Isis cabinet, bringing the veiled bust with it. Norgil stopped him.

"The trick doesn't interest me," he repeated. "Perhaps you have other new ideas—"

"I have!" put in Caradoc. "Back here in the rear of the room."

"But I have an appointment," reminded Norgil. "I'm afraid I shall have to visit you again, professor."

Norgil drew his watch from his pocket. It showed twenty-five minutes to eight; but it had stopped. Norgil suddenly realized the reason. He had been too close to the electromagnet. When he asked Caradoc what time it was, the professor didn't know. He said that he hardly ever bothered about time.

"Call the hotel," he suggested. "Find out what time it is and tell them you might be a little late. Because there is one trick you must see—my Japanese Box."

Norgil picked up the telephone and Caradoc obligingly opened a door and went up a stairway to the second floor, to give Norgil privacy with the call. Norgil dialed the hotel's number, asked for Fritz.

When told that Fritz had not yet come in, or called, he then asked for Miriam's room. But Norgil's pretty assistant did not answer. So he called the desk clerk, learned that the time was seven forty-five and left a message.

"Tell Mr. Jenrick I'll see him after I leave here," declared Norgil.

"But where are you now?" asked the clerk.

"At 529 Walden Street," returned Norgil. "But that doesn't matter. I don't want Mr. Jenrick to come here. Have him wait at the hotel."

The clerk seemed to have trouble getting the message straight, but finally said that he understood. Norgil hung up, set his watch, called upstairs to Caradoc. The professor hurried down, his tight face forming a crackling smile when he learned that Norgil could spare a few more minutes.

Caradoc led the way toward a smaller, stone-walled and dismal section near the rear of the cellar. Once Norgil almost stumbled over Gandhi, the cat. Turning on another light, the professor indicated a box shaped like a massive cube. It measured about four feet in each direction and was one of the oddest boxes that Norgil had ever seen.

Every surface of the box was inlaid with squares, like a chessboard, making a pattern of black and white. Each square measured about three inches across, and near the corners of the box were air holes. From that, Norgil deduced that the box was intended for an escape act.

"A very clever idea," asserted Caradoc, in preliminary praise of his own invention. "You are locked in the box, and then"—he paused to snap his scrawny fingers—"like that, you are out again!"

"It won't do," objected Norgil. "The box looks too tricky. People would say that it was nothing but one of those Japanese puzzle boxes built on a large scale."

Professor Caradoc looked sorrowful.

"That's about all it is," he admitted. "But I never realized it before. However, I'll show you how it operates."

He stepped to the box, picked the center square in the top, and gave it a sharp thump with his forefinger. The whole top of the box slid apart in jigsaw fashion.

"Clever," said Norgil. "Still, I can't use it."

"Try it just once," urged Caradoc, "from the inside. See how simply it operates."

The old man's tone was so pleading that Norgil decided to humor him. Caradoc fitted the top together like a big slab, while Norgil entered the box and doubled himself inside it. Caradoc settled the lid in place and clamped it tight.

"Ready!" he announced.

Norgil found the center square and pressed it. Nothing happened. His muffled voice came from inside the box, telling Professor Caradoc that the device didn't work.

Caradoc leaned close to an air hole; his tone was a chuckly snarl, as he replied, "Of course it doesn't work, unless the top is turned over, so that you can press it from within. But I was careful, Norgil —very careful—not to invert the top.

"So you don't like the Japanese Box?" Caradoc's gloat was harsh. "You'll like it less and less, Norgil, the longer you stay inside it— and you will be there for a long, long while."

Laughing with insane glee, Professor Caradoc hopped across the room and pressed the light switch. With a quick glance back into the darkened room, he stepped to the passage and slammed the door behind him.

Again his head tilted as his lips voiced their vicious laugh. Professor Caradoc had outtricked Norgil, the world's best trickster!

IV

It was stuffy inside the Japanese Box and Norgil didn't improve the atmosphere with the things he said. He tried strong-arm tactics, too, attempting to wedge the box open by a powerful leverage from his shoulders, a method that had sometimes worked in challenge escapes that he had performed on the stage.

The box top wouldn't budge. Those clamps made it like a rock. Norgil settled back as comfortable as he could and thought things over. Professor Caradoc certainly must be a crackpot if he was doing this just to get Jenrick's offer. Jenrick's interest was in Norgil and his name, not Caradoc or any other unknown magician. For the life of him Norgil could not see how the professor had gained this information. Unless—

Something that had happened at the theater suddenly became clear to the magician. He had to act fast now. Whatever Caradoc planned to do, Norgil could spoil it as neatly as the old professor had ruined the afternoon show—provided only that Norgil could get out of the box!

That proviso was a tough one. Norgil was at last satisfied that the only way to open the box was to press the center square on the top. When he poked his finger through one of the air holes, he realized that he had about two feet more to go.

Norgil shoved a pencil through, then gave up the idea. It wouldn't work. That special square required a healthy thump to spring it. Another idea occurred to the imprisoned magician and he started to work on it.

Pulling a large silk handkerchief from his pocket, Norgil pushed it through the air hole, working it along the top of the box. Then, slowly, he pulled in the handkerchief. No results came. Norgil tried an air hole at the side of the box.

This time the handkerchief seemed to catch as he drew it inward. He tried the top again without success, so went back to the side process. Maybe the idea was goofy, but Norgil had a hunch that his patient task would eventually be rewarded. He kept on with his alternate procedure.

Perhaps Professor Caradoc would have enjoyed another laugh had he supposed that Norgil was trying to open that tight-locked box with the aid of a silk handkerchief. But it happened, at that moment, that Caradoc was very busy with a task of his own.

The old wizard was upstairs in another curio room, pulling a box from beneath the telephone table. Inside the box was a phonograph record. Caradoc changed a needle and started the disc in motion. Hooked to a loudspeaker, the record repeated a recent conversation in Norgil's voice.

Norgil hadn't talked to the hotel clerk at all! His dialing of the number had simply started the recording device. The supposed clerk had been Professor Caradoc, replying from an extension phone upstairs. It had been Caradoc who had stated that neither Miriam nor Fritz was in their rooms!

Cocking his head, Caradoc listened intently to the words that came from the record. Near the finish, he stopped the disc at intervals, to make tiny chalk marks. That done, Caradoc pressed a switch that actually connected the telephone with an outside wire.

Caradoc dialed the hotel's number. A clerk answered. The record was already in motion, revolving on a slow ratio. Caradoc settled the needle in place and let Norgil's voice speak for itself.

The clerk heard the first part of the magician's conversation and made replies that Caradoc caught from the telephone receiver. Then came Norgil's later comments, but Caradoc altered them by deft lifts of the needle, that made quick jumps between the chalk marks.

"Tell Mr. Jenrick," announced Norgil's voice, "that I'll . . . see . . . him . . . here."

The clerk inquired where Norgil was. Again the record replied, controlled by Caradoc's maneuvers. It said: "At 529 Walden Street. . . . I . . . want Mr. Jenrick to come here . . ."

The needle was up, the record moving soundlessly. Caradoc heard the clerk say that he would give the message to Jenrick. The professor let the receiver drop on its hook.

Behind the hotel desk, the clerk was jotting down the message when he heard a girl's voice. It was Miriam and she asked about the message, for she had heard the clerk mention Norgil's name. The man let her see it.

"That's odd," remarked Norgil's pretty assistant. "Norgil told me to meet him here. He also said Fritz would be back here, too."

"It is odd, Miss Traymer," agreed the clerk. "Mr. Norgil hesitated when he spoke, as though he was not quite sure what he intended saying."

That was enough for Miriam. She knew that Norgil had gone to look over the old apparatus, and now her chief would need these papers which he had asked her to bring to the hotel. There would be no time to wait for Fritz.

Leaving a note for him, Miriam hurried out.

It was eight o'clock. Jenrick was due any minute, but before the promotor should go to see Norgil, Miriam wanted her boss to have the letters.

The girl took a cab outside the hotel and reached Caradoc's house within ten minutes. She told the driver to wait a short while at the next corner. Groping her way up the dark steps of the professor's home, she rang the doorbell.

She met with no delay. Caradoc was expecting Jenrick, so he opened the door promptly. For a moment, he looked surprised; then, recognizing Miriam as one of the magician's assistants, he invited her into the house. Bolting the door, Caradoc beckoned Miriam through the hallway.

"Mr. Norgil is downstairs," explained the professor in a kindly, disarming tone. "He is looking at some of my marvelous creations. Come—we shall join him."

They reached the cellar. Caradoc opened a door on the right and turned on the light. Miriam eyed a weird device that looked like a figment from some nightmare.

It was a mummy case with a glass top, set on the horizontal between two frames that held huge knives. The blades looked like mammoth chisels, their sharp edges pointing to slots in the mummy case.

On a table, farther back, stood a dial that looked like a clock face, marked for a five-minute period. It was wired to the frames that held the chisel blades.

"The mummy torture," explained Caradoc. "A girl rests in the mummy case and the dial is started. At the end of five minutes" —he paused, gave a clicking sound with his tongue—"the blades cleave through."

Miriam nodded. She had seen other torture tricks, but none so elaborate as this one. She found herself imbibing some of the enthusiasm that Norgil felt for new stage illusions. The stunt looked like a sensation. She hoped Norgil would buy it.

Caradoc was eying her keenly. Suppressing a smile, the professor approached the mummy case. It was fixed to a center pivot which enabled him to swing it upward from a head rest, so that the case stood upright. The glass front proved to be a door, which Caradoc opened.

"I'm afraid it's a trifle small," observed the professor. "Wait until I call Norgil here—or, better, if you wish to try it—"

Miriam was used to intricate stage illusions; she thought the contrivance was just another deceptive device. She stepped inside, to see if she could fit the mummy case. She did, with ample room to spare. She was smiling as she faced Professor Caradoc, never guessing the surprise move that the stoopy old man intended to produce.

With a quick thrust of his long arm, Caradoc slammed the glass door shut. It clamped automatically. Miriam pounded the glass without a result.

That glass door was unbreakable; the mummy case itself was soundproof!

Gleefully, Caradoc tilted the case to the horizontal, letting its weighted head settle upon the rest provided for it. From within the mummy case, Miriam saw him start the five-minute dial. Caradoc's expression, his eagerness of action were all that Miriam needed to tell her that the dilemma was a real one.

Those cleavers weren't harmless. This device was one that could furnish actual death!

Leaving the light on, so that Miriam's terrified eyes could watch the progress of the dial, Caradoc stepped from the room, pulling the door half shut behind him. He gave a glance across the passage to the other room where Norgil was a prisoner in the Japanese Box.

Rubbing his scrawny hands, Caradoc started upstairs, muttering his thoughts in a whispered chuckle that was a pleasure to his own ears. The theme that he expressed was a simple one.

Soon, Caradoc would deal with Jenrick. After the visitor was gone, Caradoc, too, would depart. Some day, perhaps, the starved body of Norgil would be found in the Japanese Box, and Miriam's remains would be discovered in the mummy case.

The world would think that Norgil had tried some new tricks that didn't work. That, at least, was the conclusion that formed itself in Caradoc's twisted brain. For the present, however, the old professor was satisfied with his latest accomplishment.

V

Four minutes and fifty seconds.

Miriam couldn't watch the dial. Hopeless, she lifted her eyes toward the door of the room. As her gaze fixed, the door swung inward.

Her surge of hope finished with the desolate thought that Professor Caradoc had returned to witness her death. An instant later, Miriam was swept by a new wave of elation as she recognized the figure in the doorway. The arrival wasn't Caradoc.

It was Norgil!

Knowing nothing of the magician's imprisonment in the Japanese Box, Miriam could readily believe that he had actually arrived. It was impossible, from the tight-cramped space of the glass-topped mummy casse, for her to acquaint him with the fact that her death was but a few seconds away.

But Norgil saw that for himself.

Looking first at the mummy case, he spied the menace of the knives, and the glass top gave him a view of Miriam. Norgil saw also how the mummy case had been pivoted to the horizontal. But the vital discovery came when he spotted the moving pointer of the dial, upon the table by the wall.

A second ticked, bringing a jolt of the pointer. Only three more remained. In a flash, Norgil realized that time was insufficient to reach that distant table and break the connection. He picked a closer goal, risking everything on one chance.

Driving forward, Norgil launched himself for the foot of the mummy case and took it with a flying tackle. For an instant, he was between the threatening blades; then, the force of his surge carried him in a long, downward sweep, below their level.

His clutch on the mummy case pivoted it to the upright position, where it stood between the four sets of pointing knives. The case balanced when upright, but that was something that Norgil hadn't learned. He lay on the floor, clinging tightly to the thing during the second and a half that remained.

A click came from the dial. The cleavers released. Splicing the air, four sets of blades slashed together, finding space instead of the slots in the sides of the mummy case.

Releasing the clutch, Norgil crawled out from beneath the blades. From the mummy case, Miriam met his gaze with a trembling smile. Reaching across the blades, Norgil released the clamps. Miriam pushed the front open until a big blade stopped it. There was just space for her to squeeze out and crawl beneath the knives to join Norgil.

The girl was shaky when Norgil drew her to her feet. Finding her voice, she gave her story, including the detail that Stephen Jenrick was to arrive soon at this house.

"Don't worry about Jenrick," advised Norgil. "He's smart enough to take care of himself. Smarter, perhaps, than we were. Anyway, we'll be here to see what happens."

They started out through the passage. At the bottom of the stairs leading above, Norgil pointed to the door of the big room where he had been a captive. He told Miriam, "In there I found something that has Caradoc labeled. I know how he'll handle Jenrick. Come upstairs—quietly!"

Caradoc wasn't on the first floor when they arrived there. He had evidently gone up to the second floor. Norgil opened a closet door. Among the props that he saw there was a brace of old dueling pistols. Norgil had them loaded by the time Miriam completed other preparations, at his direction.

A discordant bell echoed through the old house. Footsteps responded from the floor above. Caradoc was going down the front stairs to admit another visitor.

Soon the professor arrived in another curio room on the first floor, conducting Stephen Jenrick. The visitor was a man with heavy-jowled face, lips that were straight like the line of his nose, eyes that were keen and persuasive. He looked about, surprised that he didn't see Norgil. Since the magician was not present, Jenrick let his appraising gaze rest upon the bare-shouldered figure similar to the Veiled Isis, which topped the closed oblong cabinet.

"Norgil has gone," stated Caradoc. "He wanted my advice regarding his proposed business deal with you."

There was a lifting motion of Jenrick's grayish eyebrows. Caradoc understood the silent query.

"You have brought securities valued at fifty thousand dollars," continued Caradoc, "and you expect Norgil to put up ten thousand in cash. At present, he is not in a position to do so. But I would like to buy your securities, allowing you a reasonable profit."

The proposition interested Jenrick. He produced a sheaf of bonds, spread them for Caradoc's inspection, remarking that all were negotiable. Caradoc made a price: "Sixty thousand dollars."

Jenrick agreed. The old professor went to a corner, lifted a board in the floor. Burrowing deep, he brought out bundles of currency. Taking the bonds, he handed the money to Jenrick—six packages each containing ten thousand dollars in bills of one-hundred-dollar denomination.

While Jenrick was counting the money, Caradoc heard a sound. He couldn't locate it, but he eyed the closet, suspecting that Gandhi had gone in there. When Caradoc pulled the door wide, his gaze went stiff. On the closet shelf was the waxwork bust of Isis—but its veil was missing!

Before Caradoc could swing around, there was a rattle from the oblong box at the end wall of the room. Its door shot open, showing a figure in the cabinet. A bare arm thrust forward, aiming a big dueling pistol. Miriam tossed her head, to throw aside the veil and her loosened hair, as she commanded, "Stand where you are! Both of you!"

Caradoc recognized both Miriam and the pistol. He knew that the gun contained only one bullet. He faked a cringe. Miriam's aim shifted to Jenrick. Thrusting the bonds in his pocket, Caradoc made a quick spring for the cabinet. His long, clawish hands were free to aim for Miriam's neck. But Caradoc never completed that murderous drive.

A door flew open across the room. Norgil was facing Caradoc from the hallway. The magician was aiming the other dueling pistol. Caradoc stopped short, as helpless as Jenrick.

Just then there was a pounding at the front door. While Miriam kept the men covered, Norgil hurried out and admitted huskylooking Fritz, accompanied by two alert, keen-eyed men who seemed to know the magician by sight. Norgil directed, "All right. I've got them inside."

A moment later handcuffs had been snapped upon both Caradoc and Stephen Jenrick. Norgil helped Miriam from the oblong cabinet. While the girl was slipping her arms into the lowered sleeves of her dress, Norgil indulged in comments.

"You worked your swindle game too long," he told the surprised Jenrick. "Showing that batch of bonds was a smart game to coax a sucker into handing over ten thousand dollars as his share of a phony partnership."

"But—" Jenrick started to protest.

Norgil waved a hand, continued with, "These secret service men"—he indicated the two leanly trim men with Fritz—"informed me of a fake bond racket being pulled on other magicians and show folks. When I started getting your letters, I suspected you were the one behind the racket. So I led you on—and now have your letters, which will send you up for a stretch."

One of the government men put in, "Thanks for leading Jenrick into the trap, Mr. Norgil. But we thought it would be at the hotel. Fritz, however, got your girl's message, telling him to come here." The Fed indicated Professor Caradoc. "I don't get the connection of this man and Jenrick—"

Norgil smiled suavely. "Neither did I—at first." Then he swung on Caradoc. "You had a scheme of your own, professor, and you started to approach me about it. But in my dressing room, you found those letters from Jenrick. So you saw a chance for a bigger clean-up, and got the idea of luring Jenrick here." Norgil shook his head sadly. "But those letters didn't mention that government agents would be on Jenrick's trail. All you knew was that Jenrick was bringing fifty thousand dollars in bonds that you thought could be unloaded.

"You wanted those bonds in order to get real cash, so that you could be far away when you began to pass the counterfeit money that you've been manufacturing here. You figured you'd be out of reach by the time Jenrick began to spend the queer dough that you just paid him for the bonds!"

For the first time, Miriam and the others realized the depth of the game; how Norgil had played crook against crook to trap a pair of criminal artists.

Miriam and Fritz saw the Feds haul thousands more of Caradoc's fake money from the cache that the girl pointed out in the corner of the room. She went with them when Norgil conducted the group below, the prisoners being dragged along.

There, in one corner of the basement, Norgil showed them Caradoc's printing plant—which he had discovered after his escape from the box and just before hearing the professor trapping the girl in the adjoining, smaller room. The press was the discovery that had given the magician a perfect cue to Caradoc's game.

But before they departed, Norgil remembered something.

"We'd better bring Gandhi," he remarked. "He deserves some reward for his help."

Amid puzzled looks from the others, Norgil led the way to the Japanese Box. The old contrivance was standing closed.

"Caradoc bundled me inside there," explained Norgil. "He thought I couldn't get out, because I couldn't reach the center square of the top, to tap it. But the professor forgot Gandhi and left him in the room when he closed the door.

"There was just enough light for Gandhi to see the silk handkerchief that I kept poking from the air hole. Gandhi is playful, and he took the bait. He finally found out that the handkerchief occasionally poked from an air hole in the top, so he jumped on the box —like this."

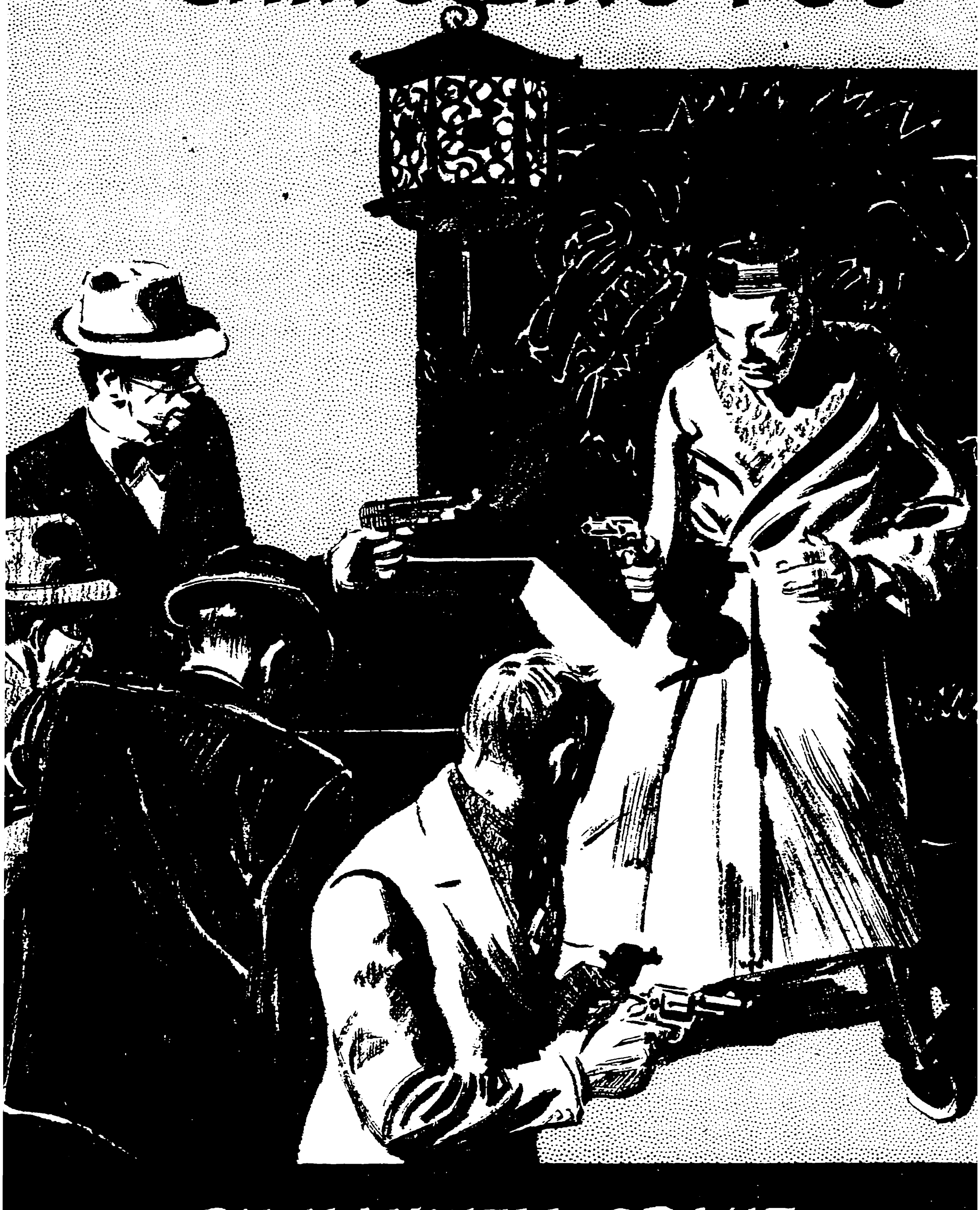
Compressing the thumb and fingers of one hand, Norgil tapped them along the top of the box, until suddenly they thumped the center square. With a snap, the trick top broke wide. Whipping out his handkerchief, Norgil dangled it in the box, then scooped his other hand inside and brought out the purring form of Gandhi, the black cat.

"I'll take good care of him, professor," promised Norgil, ignoring the fact that Caradoc's scowl was as black as Gandhi's fur. "Perhaps I can use him in the act—"

The magician paused, a smooth smile forming beneath his pointed mustache. Then: "Yes, I can use Gandhi," he added, "along with the white rabbit that you planted in the wrong man's hat!"

NORGIL THE MAGICIAN PULLS A NEAT TRICK WITH

THE CHEST OF CHING LING FOO



BY MAXWELL GRANT

CHAPTER I
EAST GOES WEST

THE chest of Ching Ling Foo stood upon a wheeled platform in the center of an otherwise deserted stage. Behind a drawn curtain, under the mild glow of border lights, Norgil the magician gazed fascinated at the relic that had reputedly belonged to the most famous of Chinese wizards.

It was really something to look at, that chest of Ching Ling Foo. It formed a cube, measuring four feet in each direction; it was painted vermilion, with crisscrossed stripes of black. Studded with beads that resembled tarnished rhinestones, the chest must have been quite glittery in its prime, although time had dulled its appearance.

Some of the studs covered nailheads; others were clustered, to form Chinese characters, on each side of the chest. Unable to read Chinese, Norgil had no idea what the characters meant. They were quite as mysterious as the chest itself.

Steve Cragey, Norgil's advance man, was standing at the wing, talking to Fritz, the magician's chief assistant. Portly Steve was shaking his head as he spoke.

"Norgil has a lot of screwy friends," declared Steve, "and they ship him some of the damnedest junk I ever heard of. But this Chinese chest takes the cake. It's worse than the coyote that the boys sent to Norgil from a dude ranch."

Fritz didn't agree with Steve.

"That's a trick chest," argued the assistant. "It comes from China. Maybe Norgil can use it in the act. That's why he's trying to figure it out."

Steve decided to have a closer look at the chest of Ching Ling Foo. As Steve approached, Norgil turned around. Tightening his rolled-up sleeves, the magician mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, gestured toward the garish chest, and stated:

"Carvo sent it, Steve. You know him, The Great Carvo. He just came in from China, after a world tour. The Chinaman that sold him this thing said it used to belong to Ching Ling Foo, so Carvo thought I'd like to own it."

Turning to the chest, Norgil began to probe some of the tarnished studs, searching for hidden springs.

"I've had it open a couple of times," said the magician. "It's easy enough, working from the outside. What I'm trying to find is how to open it from the inside. I think the thing is a Chinese version of an escape trick."

Steve had a different opinion of the matter.

"The last I heard of Carvo," he gruffed, "the fellow was stranded in Siam or Singapore, or one of those places. You sent him a couple of thousand bucks, so he could get home. Well, The Great Carvo is back in America, and he ships you this"—Steve gave a half-kick at the Chinese chest—"in return for your cash. Fine going, Norgil."

Chuckling, the magician drew a letter from his pocket. From its folds he produced a draft on a San Francisco bank.

"Carvo sent me my money, too," said Norgil, "with interest. The Chinese chest is just an added token of his appreciation. Carvo is in the money, Steve, like I said he would be."

Mollified, Steve raised his eyebrows as if he wanted to hear more. Norgil referred to the letter.

"The Great Carvo has a new backer," explained Norgil, "a promotor named Tom Gayborn. This chap Gayborn not only brought Carvo's show in from China; he's booked Carvo for the opening of the exposition in Iron City.

"Carvo is due in Iron City tomorrow. What say we hop over there, Steve? He'd be tickled pink to see us. We can spare the time, because we have a week's layoff."

Steve objected that it was eight hundred miles to Iron City, with no direct connection. Norgil countered that they could land within forty miles of the town, by taking a regular plane route, and hire a car for the rest of the trip. Norgil's argument won out.

LEAVING Fritz to crate the gaudy chest of Ching Ling Foo and store it with the rest of Norgil's paraphernalia, they headed to the airport, and caught their plane. After a night flight of nearly four hours, they reached a landing spot, hired a coupé, and began their automobile ride to Iron City.

With Steve at the wheel, Norgil smoked away at cigarettes and chatted about The Great Carvo and the chest of Ching Ling Foo. But Steve wasn't particularly interested in things that pertained to magic.

"I don't like this territory," grumbled the portly man, eying the wooded stretches that the headlights showed on every curve. "There's been a lot of stick-ups in this section of the country."

"Hijackers, after cigarette trucks," corrected Norgil. "They won't bother us, Steve. Anyway"—Norgil gestured his cigarette toward a passing road-sign—"it's only fifteen miles more into Iron City."

They forked into another road, and the next mile was one of silence. Then, Steve's apprehension returned as the coupé's motor began to cough. Experiments with the choke and the accelerator brought no results. As the car made its final wheeze, Steve jolted it to the side of the road.

"Out of gas," he groaned. "The fellow said something about filling it, but the gauge looked all right. I guess it registers wrong. We've got to stop another car."

Stepping to the highway, Steve waved his arms at the first few cars that passed. Instead of slackening, they increased their speed. Steve poked his face through the window, and spoke reprovingly to Norgil.

"I told you this was a bad road," said Steve. "Everybody is afraid to stop. You were smart enough to figure out the chest of Ching Ling Foo. Let's see if you can solve this problem."

OBLIGINGLY, Norgil stepped from his side of the car. He drew a pack of cards from his pocket, and began to toy with the pasteboards. As a car wheeled into sight from the bend, Norgil stepped to the center of the highway.

As calmly as if he stood on his own stage, the magician fanned the pack of cards. Using his free hard, he began plucking the cards one by one, and vanishing them from his fingertips. The headlights of the approaching car cast a brilliant spot upon those clever hands. The driver stopped, at sight of Norgil's manipulations.

"You see?" purred Norgil, to Steve. "My magic works. They know I'm a magician, not a stickup artist."

Steve guffawed. Two men were coming from the other car, and their attire showed that they would have stopped, whether Norgil had done his act or not. They were State police, patrolling this stretch of highway, out from Iron City.

A few minutes of chat settled everything. The cops supplied some gas, and Steve managed to start the coupé's motor. Beside the patrol car, Norgil was shaking hands with the officers, thanking them, and thinking the adventure was ended.

Then, from the chilly night air came the thwacky sound of a revolver shot. It was repeated once; twice—then shots came with a rapidity that resembled a barrage. The sounds were from the direction of the fork. Instantly, the officer at the wheel whipped the patrol car forward.

But the State cops did not begin their drive alone. Forgetting Steve and the coupé, Norgil made a jump for the running board of the patrol car. The magician, too, was riding to the fray, anxious to do his part in aiding the law,

At that moment, Norgil had forgotten the chest of Ching Ling Foo. He was to remember it shortly.

CHAPTER II
DEATH TAKES A FRIEND

BATTLE was raging about a large van that was skewed at an angle across the road, near the fork. It reminded Norgil of an attack of an ancient covered wagon, for men were shooting away from within the van, trying to stave off a horde of foemen.

As for the attackers, they were as savage as any wild tribe of Indians. They had left their cars, haphazard, on the shoulders of the road, and were circling the van, keeping up a steady fire.

They were marksmen, those crooks, as they proved when they saw the approaching lights of the patrol car. Bullets zinged a halting welcome, smashing headlights, and ruining the windshield. As Norgil dropped beside the quickly stopped car, the State Troopers scrambled out through the doors, and took to the brush beside the road.

From there, they began a nibbling attack, daring enough, and steadily effective. Half a dozen crooks were trying to shoot it out with the officers, but with no luck. Coming up beside the deserted patrol car, Norgil saw that the screening crooks were being nicked; while the police were gaining closer range with their fire.

Slowness no longer mattered. Chance for rescue was gone. All gunfire had ended from the van. The crooks beyond the screening cordon had captured the beleaguered vehicle, and were busy rifling it, while the squad of marksmen held back the two officers.

Headlights of halted cars showed Norgil what was happening. The crooks were hurling objects from the van, boxes, crates, trunks, in multitude. Everything that came out was shoved aside to make way for something else.

Gunning crooks were bellowing for their pals to hurry. It was odd, Norgil thought, that the robbers were not packing some of the loot; but as he watched, Norgil saw something even more peculiar.

With the van unloaded and its cargo scattered, the crooks suddenly abandoned all of the swag. At a shouted signal, the whole band made for their cars, leaving the highway strewn with booty that they no longer wanted!

SEEING the crooks in flight, the State patrolmen charged. Norgil could tell where they were by the spurts from their guns, shots that were unanswered by the crooks. Gifted with sudden forethought, Norgil sprang to the wheel of the patrol car and started the blackened vehicle forward, guided by the lights around the van.

Norgil's move was timely. Where one rescue had failed, he supplied another that succeeded.

Coming on to the highway, the overzealous State patrolmen were suddenly circled by the glare of flashlights. Crooks who hadn't reached the cars had dropped back, to spring an improvised trap. They were ready to settle the State cops, in return for the losses that their own tribe had suffered.

The uniformed men were diving for cover that they could never reach. Guns were actually starting their stabs as the converging crooks piled after the police, thinking they had the pair doomed. Then, like an avalanche from nowhere, came the thing that stopped those men of crime.

Hitting a speed close to forty miles an hour, Norgil launched the patrol car out of the darkness, squarely into the middle of the mob. There were wild yells as crooks scattered; those shouts were punctuated by lusty thwacks against the radiator grille as the hurtling car mowed down a trio of victims.

Yanking the wheel, Norgil heard figures flying past the windows. He shoved the brake pedal as he slashed the car toward the van, trying to get two more of the scurrying murderers. Those crooks dived beneath the van, and must have reached a car on the other side. For Norgil could hear the sound of several departing motors.

Those roars that faded into the distance occurred after Norgil had cracked up the patrol car against the bulky van. The magician was slumped, somewhat bewildered, in the midst of his self-made wreckage when the State Troopers extricated him.

The crooks were gone, and there was no way of pursuing them at present, but Norgil was due for congratulations. Whatever the police had done toward thwarting the robbery, Norgil had topped it by rescuing the cops themselves.

Disregarding dead and crippled hijackers, the officers started toward the rear of the van. On their way, they stumbled among the crates and boxes that strewed the road. Their exclamations showed puzzlement. Instead of cases of cigarettes or other merchandise, they were finding a great variety of unfamiliar objects—curious cabinets, odd-shaped metal tables, huge bowls of glass, and stacks of velvet curtains.

Norgil knew what the equipment was. These were the stage properties belonging to a magic show. They could belong to one person only, the man who was due in Iron City—Norgil's friend, The Great Carvo.

SPRAWLED inside the rear of the pillaged van were two dead men, whose rough attire told that they were the van crew. Flinging the rays of his flashlight farther, Norgil saw another huddled figure. Entering the van, he stooped beside the dead shape, turned its face up into the light.

Norgil recognized the aristocratic profile that he had not seen for many months. The third dead man was the magician who had finished a very hazardous round-the-world tour, only to meet death in his homeland —The Great Carvo.

Grimly, Norgil stared at the face of his murdered friend until he heard the State policemen calling him. Cars had arrived, paced by Steve Cragey in the hired coupé. The police were sending the dead and wounded into Iron City while they took up the trail of the hijackers.

Soon the coupé was covering the fifteen miles into town. At the wheel, Steve kept making sidelong looks toward Norgil. Seeking to offer sympathy because of Carvo's death, Steve said:

"It was tough about Carvo. Tough for him, and for you, too, Norgil—"

"Why tough for me?" snapped Norgil, in a sharp tone that was new to Steve. "It's a break for me, Steve"—the magician's laugh had a shrewd note—"because it means that I can put on that show in Iron City, instead of Carvo."

"You can't mean—"

"That I'm going to grab the job for myself? Why not? Listen, Steve, when we get to Iron City, you look up Tom Gayborn, the fellow that's backing Carvo's show. Tell him I'll play the date on percentage."

Steve mouthed a horrified protest that brought a harsh laugh from Norgil. To Steve's way of looking at it, Norgil was showing very little respect for the memory of a dead friend. Norgil argued that, with Carvo gone, the past did not matter. If Steve wanted to hold his job, he'd have to talk to Gayborn about booking Norgil's show.

Silenced, Steve felt that all his admiration toward Norgil had turned to sheer contempt. Between gritted teeth, Steve promised to talk to Gayborn, and present the proposition. It was Steve's job, so he'd go through with it, but he hinted that Norgil might be needing a new advance man, very soon.

Calmly smoking another string of cigarettes, Norgil paid no attention to Steve's remarks. The magician's suave face had become impenetrable.

As they rolled into Iron City, Steve found himself trying to guess what thoughts lay behind Norgil's poker-faced expression.

Had he learned, Steve would still have been quite puzzled.

Norgil was thinking about the chest of Ching Ling Foo.

CHAPTER III

NORGIL MAKES PLANS

FOR a man who had apparently gained just what he wanted, Norgil seemed in a singular mood. Steve Cragey held that opinion as they sat in a hotel room the next afternoon talking with Tom Gayborn.

The promoter had booked Norgil's show into Iron City to take the place of the act that The Great Carvo would never again perform. Norgil's own equipment had arrived by rail and was being transferred to the theater. Yet Norgil did not seem highly pleased about it.

Steve was wondering if the magician had experienced a change of heart. Maybe his better nature had told him that he had done a very small thing, capitalizing on the Carvo tragedy. Steve wasn't sure, for Norgil had not expressed himself upon the subject.

In fact, Norgil had deliberately avoided all talk of The Great Carvo, and he hadn't once mentioned the chest of Ching Ling Foo. Perhaps Norgil was suffering deserved pangs everytime he thought of the gift that he had received from his dead friend, Carvo.

Norgil's mood was not lost on Gayborn. The promoter thought he understood it, which was not surprising. Tom Gayborn was a prepossessing man who had traveled far and often. He had made fortunes, and had sunk them in many sorts of enterprises. He knew human nature and its weaknesses.

Tall, gray-haired, with a long, solemn face, Gayborn had a fatherly air as he stepped toward the window where Norgil was watching the parade that marked the opening of the Iron City exposition.

"I know how you feel about Carvo," spoke Gayborn, in a soothing tone. "He was my friend, too, Norgil. But you shouldn't feel that you did something cheap in taking his place here. If I'd thought you were cheap, I wouldn't have booked you.

"Look at it from this angle: Carvo had other people in his show. He's dead, and that puts them out of jobs. But if you make money here, I'll make money, too. What I make goes to Carvo's troupe."

Gayborn's earnest speech took slow effect. The thing that really roused Norgil from his lethargic mood was a blare of martial music that came from the street below. The Iron City police band was parading past in full uniform at the head of a long procession. The burst of trumpets, the smash of drums, gave Norgil a sudden lift.

A SMILE beneath his pointed mustache, Norgil turned about and extended his hand to Gayborn, who received it with a warm shake. With a sparkle in his eyes, Norgil threw a reproachful glance at Steve. Then, his suavity restored, Norgil suggested:

"Let's go down to the theater, Steve, and arrange for a rehearsal. The show doesn't open until tomorrow night, but there's a lot to do before then."

On the way, Steve was quite apologetic, because he had misunderstood Norgil the night before.

"If I'd only known," began Steve, "that you were concerned about Carvo's troupe, I'd have seen the light. You did good work, getting your thought across to Gayborn."

Norgil shook off the subject with a smile and a shrug. As they neared the theater, he stopped to buy an evening newspaper. With Steve scanning the headlines over his shoulder, Norgil read exactly what he expected.

The police laid the previous night's murder to the mob of hijackers who had been specializing in the robbery of cigarette shipments. The crooks had evidently mistaken Carvo's van for a camouflaged merchandise truck. But the theory had not given the police a trail to the hijackers who had escaped. Those malefactors, and the unknown big shot that ruled them, were still at large, and likely to remain so.

"I'm glad you've seen the light, Steve," purred Norgil, as they approached the magician's dressing room, "because I have a great idea in mind. Since my engagement here in Iron City will be a tribute to The Great Carvo, anything that we do to raise more money will be legitimate, won't it?"

Steve agreed that it would be. Norgil opened the door of the dressing room and pointed to the far wall. Steve stared as he saw the black-and-vermilion chest of Ching Ling Foo.

"I phoned Fritz to unpack it," said Norgil. "I'll have him polish up those rhinestones so they'll look pretty bright. I'll do a Chinese number in the show, featuring the chest of Ching Ling Foo."

"You'll mention that it belonged to Carvo?"

"Of course." Norgil chuckled, in a manner that made Steve's doubts return. "I'll say the trick was Carvo's last legacy, or any other bunk that will bring in the crowd."

Steve grimaced. The thing sounded cheap to him, but he realized that Gayborn probably wouldn't think so. Gayborn, it seemed, had captured Norgil's viewpoint. Yet Steve couldn't dispute the logic of it. They were showmen, both, Norgil and Gayborn. What they did would be in the name of charity. Despite himself, Steve nodded agreement with Norgil's plan.

"It doesn't matter what the trick is like," observed Norgil, idly. "I'll figure out some way to work it in with the usual Chinese routine. Anything that catches the eye will be good enough, and this chest of Ching Ling Foo has what it takes."

Norgil was approaching the squarish chest as he spoke. Half turning, he gave a sweeping gesture.

"I'll have the thing wheeled all around," he told Steve. "The audience will get worked up, wondering what is going to happen when I open the chest. A touch of my finger"— his hand approached one of the glittering nail heads—"and anything might pop up!"

AS Norgil's finger pressed the secret spring, the lid of the chest flew open. It swung upward, on a powerful hinge, making a half revolution in Norgil's own direction. But that wasn't all that happened.

The very thing that Norgil had visualized came true. Something popped up as the box opened!

It came with the speed of a jumping jack—a human figure, as speedy as it was lithe. That form might have been the spirit of the Chinese chest itself, a manifestation of the wizardry that had once belonged to Ching Ling Foo.

The figure that bobbed living from the chest was that of a black-haired Chinese girl, garbed in her native costume. The dark glitter of her slanted eyes was vengeful, as a serpent's glare.

Snakelike, too, was the motion of her slender hand, as it whipped from the folds of her black, dragon-decorated robe. Clutched in her long-nailed fingers was a thin-bladed knife that tapered to a needle point.

The girl's only utterance was a quick-sucked hiss that trembled her ruddy lips. Then, her saffron-tint hand went back across her shoulder; paused, and sped forward in a murderous swing.

Perfect in aim, with only the mere seconds of delay required for her lightning moves, the girl from the Chinese chest flung the knife straight for the heart of Norgil the magician!

CHAPTER IV
OUT OF THE PAST

AS THE Chinese girl started that murderous hurl, Norgil's hands came upward. They did not rise empty. With them, they brought a solid object that had come Norgil's way the moment the chest sprang open.

The object in question was the hinged flap that formed the top of the Chinese chest.

Norgil had often claimed that the hand was quicker than the eye. This was one time when he proved the adage. His hands had plucked the edge of the lid instinctively, the moment that it glanced his knee.

His own action quicker than the girl's, Norgil was raising a flying shield before the knife left those long-nailed fingers. The blade struck the thick square that Norgil thrust into its path. Driving clear through the thick wood of the chest lid, the knife gave a disappointed quiver that ended its swift flight.

Bringing the lid back toward him, Norgil rested his chin on the angled edge and met the girl's gaze. Slanted eyes had gone wide; not through horror, but because of disappointment. Steve was pouncing forward, hoping to grab the Chinese girl before she made another attempt on Norgil's life. But Norgil waved Steve back.

Force wasn't necessary. The girl had launched the lone thrust of which she was capable. Calmly, she was ready to accept whatever happened to her.

Norgil spoke. His tone carried no enmity; not even disapproval. Rather, he struck a note of sympathy and commendation, which the girl recognized.

"You wanted to kill me," he told her, "because of Carvo. You thought that I had some hand in his death."

Dark eyes kept fixed on Norgil's. At last, the girl nodded. Letting the lid descend, Norgil extended his hand to assist the girl from the chest.

"I was Carvo's friend," said the magician, steadily. "I tried to save his life last night. I took his place, not to profit by his death, but to accomplish what you came here to seek—vengeance against a murderer."

The words amazed Steve Cragey. He was beginning to learn things that he hadn't even tried to guess. As for the Chinese girl, she believed Norgil utterly. As she stepped from the chest, she made a profuse apology, in perfect English.

"I was very wrong," she said with a sad smile, "to think that one friend could forget another. I was told that in America, no one was ever subtle, as we are in China. But I find myself mistaken, Mr. Norgil."

THEREWITH the girl told her story. Her name was Lotan Moy; she had joined Carvo's show in China, to serve as an interpreter. She had come to America with the troupe, to visit friends in San Francisco.

"When I heard of Carvo's death," concluded Lotan Moy, "I came here by plane. The newspapers mentioned that you had found Carvo's body"—dark eyes were fixed on Norgil—"and then replaced his show with your own."

"Which looked very bad," agreed Norgil. "A lot of other people didn't like it—Steve here, for one. But in America, people don't usually look for crime behind a business deal. The actual case is that I'm playing a hunch, Miss Moy, to find out why Carvo was murdered. You're the one person who might supply me with some further facts."

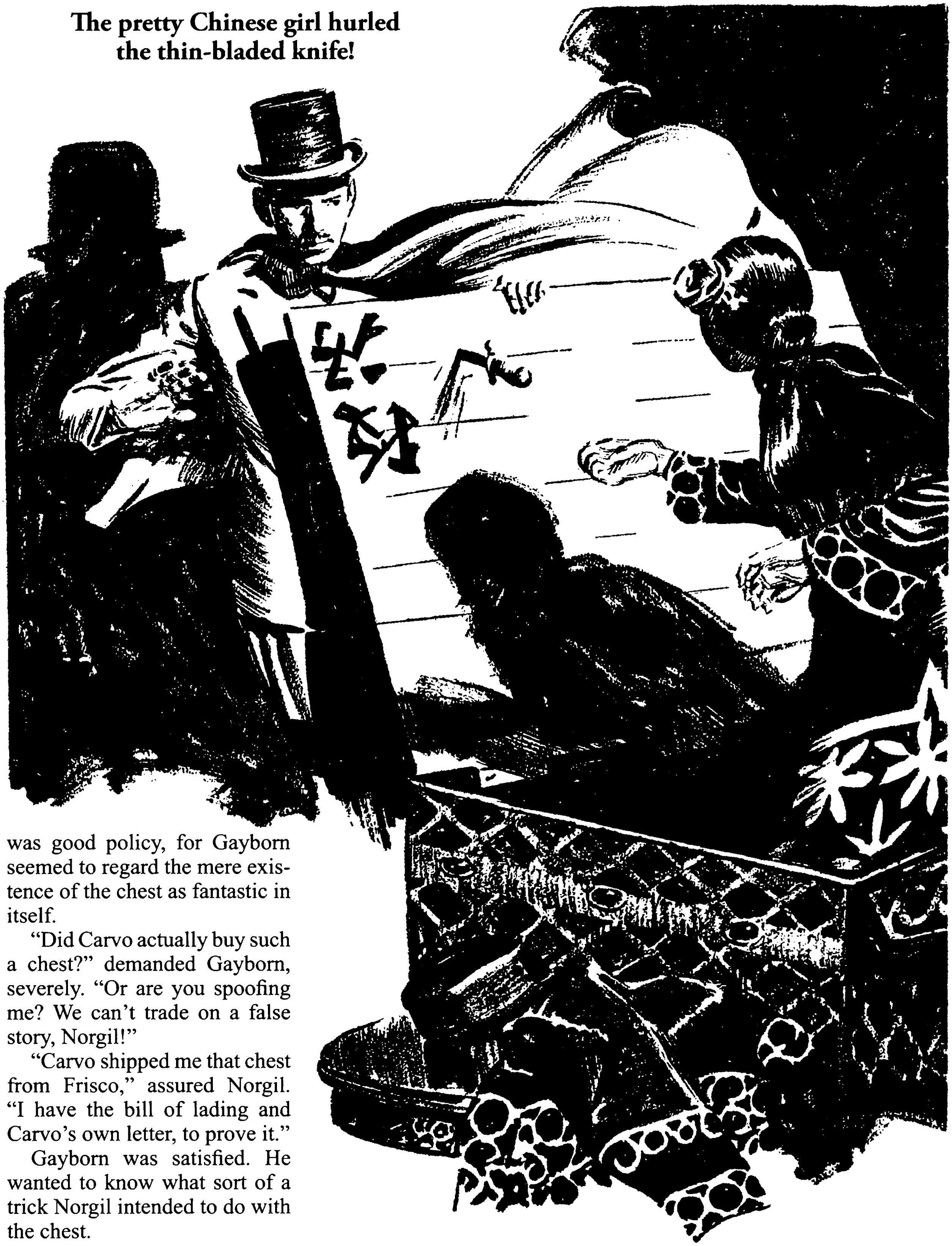
Lotan Moy expressed her willingness to aid. Norgil asked questions regarding the chest of Ching Ling Foo, where Carvo had bought it, as well as when and why.

He learned that Carvo had bought the chest in Shanghai, just before sailing for America; that it had been brought to the theater by a Chinese who claimed to be a former assistant of Ching Ling Foo, that the price had been so absurdly low, and that Carvo had not been able to resist purchasing it.

When Norgil asked if Tom Gayborn knew about the Chinese chest, Lotan Moy shook her head. She explained that Gayborn had left Shanghai a week in advance of Carvo's show; that when they reached Frisco, Gayborn had already gone on to Iron City.

LEAVING Lotan Moy and Steve at the theater, Norgil went to the hotel. Definite plans had shaped in the magician's mind; the meeting with Lotan Moy had strengthened them. Stopping at the hotel desk, Norgil picked up some messages, then went to see Tom Gayborn, who was in his room.

Norgil told Gayborn about the chest of Ching Ling Foo. He omitted mention of Lotan Moy, which



The pretty Chinese girl hurled the thin-bladed knife!

was good policy, for Gayborn seemed to regard the mere existence of the chest as fantastic in itself.

"Did Carvo actually buy such a chest?" demanded Gayborn, severely. "Or are you spoofing me? We can't trade on a false story, Norgil!"

"Carvo shipped me that chest from Frisco," assured Norgil. "I have the bill of lading and Carvo's own letter, to prove it."

Gayborn was satisfied. He wanted to know what sort of a trick Norgil intended to do with the chest.

"An escape stunt," said Norgil. "I'm going to get inside the thing and try to work my way out. It may take me several attempts to get the hang of it, though."

Frowning at the messages that he held in his hand, Norgil made a mental calculation.

"I have to see the police chief," he said, "to confirm some local testimony regarding that gun fight on the road. Some State cops are calling, too, but I'll have them steered over to the theater. I can talk to them, while Fritz and the boys are setting stage."

"What time is the rehearsal?" asked Gayborn.

"At seven thirty," replied Norgil. "Steve will arrange for the orchestra to be there. I'll shoo everybody out of the place, State cops and all. We'll have the Rialto Theater all to ourselves when I try out the new trick. Come around and look it over, Gayborn."

Norgil's schedule ran almost to the dot. The orchestra arrived soon after seven, and at half past, Norgil saw the State police out through the stage door. Their car was pulling away when Norgil slipped his arms into a crimson mandarin robe and adjusted a yellow mask upon his face.

Curtains drew back as Norgil stepped on stage, to become the center of a gorgeous setting where Chinese screens and dragon statues rivaled the taborets and curious caskets that were used in the magician's usual Oriental act.

Tinkly music came from the ten-piece orchestra. Looking across the pit, Norgil saw Tom Gayborn, seated beside Steve Cragey. Those two constituted the entire audience; nevertheless, Norgil warmed up by performing a Chinese paper-tearing trick.

A spotlight fixed itself upon Norgil's disguised features. He smiled blandly, for his lips were visible beneath the edge of the half mask. Bowing as he finished the restoration of a torn strip of tissue paper, Norgil glanced across his shoulder, at the chest of Ching Ling Foo, which stood on its platform, near the center of the stage.

For the first time, Norgil saw that chest under the glare of a spotlight. Fritz had done a good job polishing the decorations. The spotlight's glow did the rest. Glittering with bejeweled brilliance, the chest of Ching Ling Foo was a thing of splendor.

At that sight, Norgil knew that every hunch he had followed was a correct one. The last link of Carvo's death was complete. The answer had crashed to Norgil's mind like the cymbal strokes from the orchestra.

Norgil had solved crime's riddle, along with the secret that belonged to the mysterious chest of Ching Ling Foo!

CHAPTER V
CROSSED CRIME

DESPITE THE soft strains of the orchestra a grim hush seemed to control the Rialto Theater as Norgil stepped toward the chest of Ching Ling Foo. The spotlight was gone; the brilliant chest had dulled as the stage went partially dim.

Houselights had risen at Norgil's cue, showing vast spaces of theater seats, deserted except for the pair that Steve and Gayborn occupied. Those lights showed a contrivance hanging from the dome of the theater—a miniature pagoda, painted a turkey red.

Part of the equipment used in Norgil's regular Chinese act, the pagoda was always hanging from the dome when the curtain rose. Neither Steve nor Gayborn noticed it, however. Their attention was fixed on the chest of Ching Ling Foo.

There was something else that no one noticed; not even Norgil. Stealthy figures were moving into the Rialto Theater, creeping men who came by the stage door and the unlocked exits. They were taking over the theater, unmolested; crooks of the same brand as those who had murdered The Great Carvo!

Imperturbably, Norgil pressed a jeweled stud at the side of the Chinese chest. The top flung open. Stepping into the chest, Norgil folded his arms, and bowed in mandarin style. Tinkly music lulled, while Norgil spoke words in pidgin English.

"All watch!" he chirped. "Maybe for long time I stay here; maybe not. You see."

Dropping down into the chest, Norgil pulled the lid shut with him. There was a *click* as it clamped in place. No longer was the magician a solitary figure, dominating the stage. Only the Chinese chest held full attention.

Not for long.

With concerted action, a dozen men surged upon the stage. Some came from the wings; others from aisles, where they had lurked. A pair reached the Chinese chest. The others flocked for the footlights, flanked by a few who stayed on the steps that led from audience to stage.

All wore masks; all carried revolvers. They brandished the weapons toward the orchestra, also covering Steve and Gayborn, who sat beyond the pit. One crook, acting as leader of the tribe, snarled an order to the orchestra:

"Keep playing!"

The musicians obeyed. Busy with their instruments, they saw two crooks wheeling the Chinese box around, prepared to roll it from the stage. Thugs intended to carry off that trophy with Norgil a prisoner inside it!

There was a groan from Steve Cragey—one that Tom Gayborn echoed. To Steve this was the tightest fix that Norgil had ever encountered—a predicament that rendered the magician helpless, while not a hand could be lifted to help him.

Steve forgot that the fix was of Norgil's own making, Those crooks on the stage were due for a surprise. It came with startling suddenness, a clatter from the hanging pagoda that dangled beneath the theater dome.

The sides of the pagoda fell away. A revolver shot ripped loud above the frantic music of the orchestra. The report issued from the breakaway pagoda; and crooks saw the man responsible. So did Steve. Gaping upward, he gasped.

"Norgil!"

WITHIN the remains of the pagoda, the man with the mandarin mask was leveling his own gun toward the stage. The only crooks who had the proper angle to combat him were the two who had started to wheel away the Chinese chest. They sprang about, lifting their guns.

There was another clatter, as the chest lid shot open. Wheeling amazed, the crooks found themselves faced by the original mandarin—the real Norgil.

The magician had not left the chest of Ching Ling Foo. The double in the pagoda was Fritz, wearing a duplicate costume. Norgil had planted him in the pagoda, a half hour before rehearsal time, in preparation for this very climax.

Norgil here; Norgil there—the thing had the crooks befuddled. But they were a dozen against a pair, those crooks. Twelve guns to three, for Norgil held a brace of weapons. As Norgil and Fritz began to shoot, the crooks sprang for cover, figuring that they would win a rapid victory, despite a few casualties.

In their hurry, crooks forgot the orchestra.

Instruments clattered; but their rattle lacked music. Strings and brasses were tossed in a pile, with traps and snare drums. Ten men were drawing guns as they came over the footlights, a human tidal wave.

The musicians delivered a volley that showed them to be marksmen. Crooks, sprawling right and left, saw badges flashing in the light. Jabbing a few added shots across the edge of the Chinese chest, Norgil wore his bland smile.

Almost the same smile that he had shown that afternoon, when he saw the police band parading past Gayborn's window. In his visit to the police chief, Norgil had announced that he expected an invitation at the theater, and had suggested a way to bring the crooks into a perfect trap.

It was Norgil, not Steve, who had arranged for the orchestra. Not the one employed by the theater, but a special quota of musicians, picked from the police band!

Wearing playing clothes, the cops had strolled into the theater under the very eyes of spying crooks. Carrying musical instruments that they knew how to use, these officers had passed muster from start to finish. Their guns had done the rest. The law had gained full command. Crooks, whimpering and wounded, were being rounded up from all corners.

Norgil alone was looking toward the audience. He saw Gayborn speak to Steve, then rise shakily and start out along an aisle. Vaulting from the Chinese chest, Norgil shouted after him. Frantically, Gayborn yanked a gun, took aim for the magician.

There was no need for Norgil to fire. Gayborn went suddenly rigid; let his gun fall, as his hands came up. A crouched figure had come up from a theater seat, to press a revolver muzzle against the tall man's neck. Tom Gayborn, crime's big shot, was trapped like his motley mob. Gayborn's captor was Lotan Moy.

WHEN crooks had been removed from the theater, Norgil, his yellow mask discarded, explained things to Steve Cragey. Two listeners were close at hand—the police chief, who had come with the orchestra as a piccolo player, and Gayborn, who sat scowling at his handcuffs.

"I had my first hunch on the highway," stated Norgil, "right after Carvo's murder. Those crooks took everything out of the van, but carried nothing away. They were looking for something that they didn't find.

"It could only have been the chest of Ching Ling Foo, for it really belonged with Carvo's apparatus. Since I happened to have the chest, I knew that it would be the right bait for the crooks, once they learned I owned it."

Norgil swung to Gayborn; met the big shot's ugly glare.

"You were the one man who could have arranged it all," accused Norgil. "In Shanghai, you had a Chinese agent sell the chest to Carvo, after you had left. When you booked Carvo into Iron City, you arranged his transportation, too.

"You hired the thugs to attack the van, so that they could steal the chest. As Carvo's backer, a man who would lose some money by his death, you had a swell alibi. But you didn't know that Carvo had sent the chest to me, instead of keeping it for his own show."

Gayborn began to snarl denials. Lotan Moy interrupted him. She was repeating facts that she had told to Norgil—testimony that fitted with everything the magician had said. Gayborn grimaced, then made a final effort.

"If I'd wanted that chest," he sneered, "I could have brought it to America myself. Your accusations are ridiculous, Norgil. What would I want with that piece of junk?"

"I wondered about that," conceded Norgil, "until tonight, when the puzzle solved itself."

Norgil snapped his fingers toward the projection booth. The cue brought the spotlight. The chest of Ching Ling Foo became resplendent. Steve Cragey gasped, realizing that the decorations were real gems, not rhinestones. Steve uttered one word:

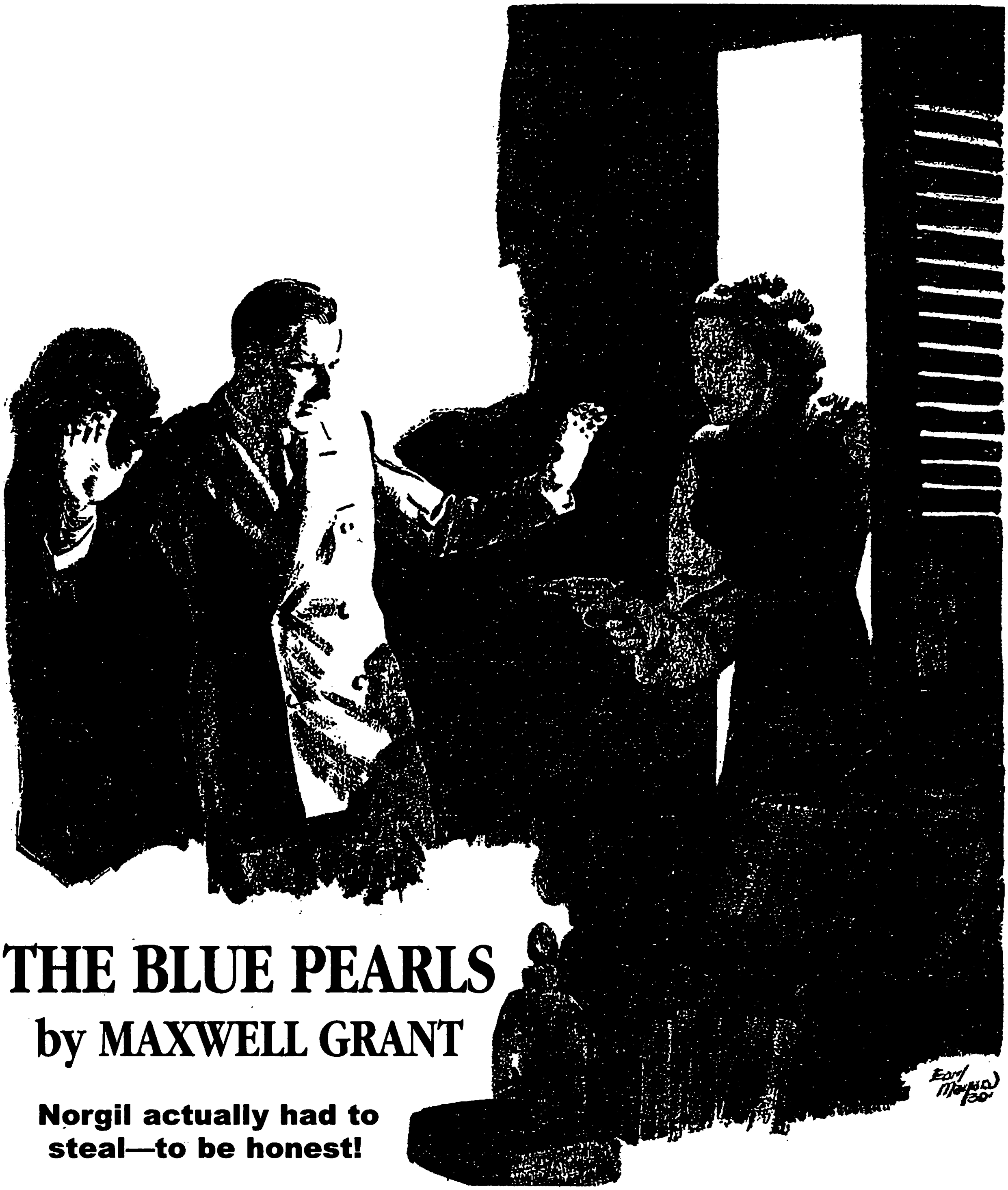
"Diamonds!"

"About two hundred thousand dollars' worth," calculated Norgil. "Gayborn used Carvo as a dupe to smuggle them, right under the noses of the customs officials. Gayborn knew that no one would suspect them, the way they had been dulled and plastered over a trick chest, like cheap glass beads. This chest came right through, duty free, with the rest of Carvo's gaudy apparatus. Carvo had a perfect reputation; his word for all his equipment was taken."

When the police chief had marched Gayborn out through the stage door, Norgil turned to Steve.

"The show opens tomorrow night," purred Norgil. "All the cash we take in goes to Carvo's family and his troupe. We can double the price, and still pack those seats"—Norgil's gesturing hand circled the empty theater, and pointed finally to the stage—"when people hear about the chest of Ching Ling Foo!"

THE END



THE BLUE PEARLS

by MAXWELL GRANT

Norgil actually had to steal—to be honest!

CHAPTER I
NORGIL MAKES A DEAL

MIRIAM disliked Frenzel the moment she saw him.

He came backstage at the Hayrick Club while Norgil was in the office talking to the manager. A sallow man, with bulging forehead and wide jaw, he gave a sharp-eyed look at Norgil's half-packed apparatus and let a half-amused smile play over his darkish lips.

Frenzel didn't see Miriam. She was behind a curtain, packing Norgil's Chinese costume. She decided to stay there, because she wondered what anyone was doing around the Hayrick Club in the middle of the afternoon. If the sallow caller started to trifle with any of the equipment, it was Miriam's intention to step through the curtains and challenge him.

Then, unwillingly, Miriam became an eavesdropper. Frenzel saw Norgil coming from the office, and stepped forward to meet him. Miriam heard him give his name and mention a telephone call, which brought a nod from Norgil. In a moment, the two were in front of the curtain, resuming a subject that they had evidently discussed in part across the telephone.

"I'm glad you're interested, Norgil," Frenzel confided, in an oily tone that he accompanied with a gold-toothed gleam. "If anyone can pick up those pearls, you're the man."

They had turned, so that Miriam could see Norgil's face. Suave to the tips of his pointed mustache, Norgil was outmatching Frenzel in smoothness, as he asked:

"And the other gems?"

"They don't matter," replied Frenzel. "The pearls are all that interest us. Mrs. Bannishaw insured them for fifty thousand dollars. Of course, they're worth less than what she bought them. She's been trying to sell them. We've checked on the offers, and the highest was thirty thousand."

Norgil gave a slow, methodical nod, as though weighting the final sum named. At last, he questioned: "You say you've got a couple of men out at Bannishaw's?"

"Yes," admitted Frenzel, "but don't worry about them. They know what they're supposed to do. If they make any trouble for you"—his tone was harsh—"I'll take care of them."

Together, Norgil and Frenzel were walking out through the silent spaces of the deserted nightclub. Alone, Miriam found her brain flooded with the medley of thoughts.

This was Norgil's off night at the Hayrick Club. He had booked a private engagement at the Long Island home of Mrs. Ida Bannishaw, wealthy dowager who was the leading spirit of a very convivial social set. A frequent patron at the Hayrick, Mrs. Bannishaw had been highly intrigued by Norgil's clever magic act; hence had arranged her party especially for the night when he could be there.

Columnists had mentioned the scheduled soiree. It wasn't surprising to Miriam that crooks should have looked forward to the occasion in terms of Mrs. Bannishaw's famous blue pearls. For a long while, that matched necklace had been crime's target. Ida Bannishaw had given up wearing the pearls anywhere except in her own home, at the advice of her insurance company.

Nor was Miriam surprised that Frenzel should proposition Norgil on the theft of those famous pearls.

Behind Norgil's suave manner and marvelous dexterity, crooks fancied the existence of a scheming mind; they also credited Norgil with the tricky skill necessary to the execution of successful crime.

The magician encouraged that belief. Often it had enabled him to trap criminals and turn them over to the law. Still, crooks persisted in approaching Norgil; probably they thought that those who had taken trips to prison were doublecrossers who had tried to outsmart the magician.

That could account for Frenzel's direct proposal. The job of acquiring the blue pearls was being left to Norgil. The matter of Norgil's share in the proceeds hadn't been mentioned within Miriam's hearing; but she knew that Frenzel was discussing it as he and the magician strolled out through the nightclub.

WHEN Norgil returned backstage, Miriam wasn't there. It was her policy never to interfere with any of his plans, no matter how risky the undertaking. Norgil was going ahead with the packing when Miriam arrived, quite breathless, apologizing because she had spent more time than she expected on a shopping tour.

They rode to Long Island in a cab crowded by suitcases filled with props and costumes. For a while, Norgil talked about the show, but he covered that subject rather briefly. "Mrs. Bannishaw insists that I do my usual routine," he told Miriam. "Ten minutes of sleights, finishing with the borrowed watch in the nest of boxes. Then, I'll step off stage to get the gloves—"

"The gloves?" interrupted Miriam. "I usually bring them to you."

"I've decided to change that," returned Norgil. "I'll get the gloves while you return the watch to the owner. It will give me a chance for a new entry. After that, the show will be the same. I do the card sleights with gloves, and you fill in with the paper-tearing number while I change to my Chinese costume."

All that settled, Norgil came to the subject that Miriam wanted to hear about. The cab was rolling into the grounds of a large estate, when the magician remarked:

"Tonight, Miriam, you'll see the famous blue pearls. I understand that Mrs. Bannishaw is going to have them on display, around her ample neck."

Miriam smiled, then queried:

"How much are the pearls worth?"

"About two thousand each," returned Norgil. "There's two dozen of them; that would total forty-eight thousand dollars."

Miriam nodded.

"We'll call it fifty thousand," decided Norgil, "and remember this, Miriam." His tone became impressive. "I want you to keep your eye on those pearls, whenever I'm not around. Somebody might take it into his head to steal them."

The cab had reached the porte cochre of a huge mansion. A servant was opening the cab door; others were removing the luggage, so that the passengers could alight. From the bows that Norgil received, Miriam recognized that the magician was regarded as a distinguished guest.

But Miriam was staring, wondering what their departure would be like. Somehow Norgil's final words left her aghast. Despite his half-bantering tone, Miriam was convinced that Norgil actually intended to filch the Bannishaw pearls!

CHAPTER II
THE SLIGHT THAT FAILED

A DAPPER MAN greeted the arrivals when they reached the front hall. He was Mrs. Bannishaw's secretary, and he answered to the name of Claymore. Facially, he looked rather youthful, but his baldish head was a token of added years.

It was plain, too, that Claymore had spent a long while in the Bannishaw service, for the servants followed his orders and showed him marked respect. Miriam promptly decided that Claymore could be eliminated as a person in league with Frenzel.

Claymore conducted Norgil and Miriam to a small room that was fitted like an office. It had two doors, one leading in from the hallway, the other connecting with another room. Claymore locked the connecting door, but left the key in the lock.

"You won't be disturbed here," he said in a dry tone. "The ballroom is just across the hall; you can enter it by a little door, to the platform that we have arranged for you."

With Claymore gone, Norgil turned to see Miriam gazing from the rear window of the office. Joining the girl, the magician smiled. Miriam was looking enviously upon a garden scene, where guests were lounging in deck chairs, surrounding a fish pool.

Waiters were serving refreshments to the guests, who seemed quite delighted by the semitropical setting. There were parrots and macaws in cages, screeching for tidbits that were handed them, and occasionally, someone tossed bread pellets into the pool, where voracious tropical fish promptly gobbled the food.

"Stroll out and join the guests," suggested Norgil, sympathetically. "I'll get the act ready."

"But ... but—" Miriam paused, to end her stammer. "Would I be welcome?"

"As much as those chaps over there," laughed Norgil, pointing through the closed window. "I've seen them before. They're private detectives who work for the insurance company. They're trying to figure out who is going to steal the Bannishaw pearls."

Finding a roundabout route, Miriam reached the garden and chose a deck chair. Soon she was sipping champagne and nibbling caviar sandwiches along with the assorted guests. Yet as she looked toward the closed windows of the office, Miriam wondered if Norgil had a special reason for sending her outside.

While thus speculating, she saw a man stroll from the mansion. She recognized his sallow face by the glow of hanging lamps that were replacing the fading daylight. The man was Frenzel; from his smug expression, Miriam was sure that he had just held another interview with Norgil!

FRENZEL didn't have time to take a deck chair before a man wearing a chauffeur's cap approached him, gave a salute, and inquired:

"You're Mr. Frenzel?"

From the chauffeur's tone, this knowing smirk, it was obvious that he recognized Frenzel, and was merely going through a pretense. Close by, a gardener was peering over a hedge, juggling a pair of sheers, as if his day's work had been finished. A waiter paused, quite near, holding a tray of sandwiches.

It had the earmarks of a rendezvous between Frenzel and the men that he had mentioned. Miriam, snuggled deep in her chair, expected to hear something of deep interest, when Claymore's sudden arrival interrupted whatever the chauffeur had to say.

Others shifted suddenly away, as Claymore spoke brusquely to the chauffer:

"Mrs. Bannishaw is waiting to see you, Byrd."

"All right, Mr. Claymore," said Byrd, his smirk fading. Then, turning to Frenzel, the chauffeur added, apologetically, "I'm sorry, sir. I thought you were the gentleman who wanted me to meet some friends at that station."

Byrd left with Claymore. Frenzel strolled past the fish pool, giving sidelong glances at the stolid-looking detectives, who eyed him quite closely—something which pleased Miriam, then disturbed her. She was wondering if she should mention the incident to Norgil, when she heard a tap from his window, signifying that she was to return.

It was almost showtime. Miriam said nothing, as she helped Norgil carry the apparatus across the ballroom, where they found the little platform that Claymore had mentioned. Two screens formed wings at the sides of the improvised stage, and there were closed curtains at the front.

While Norgil and Miriam were making ready, a buzz beyond the curtains told that the audience had begun to assemble. With everything set, Norgil motioned Miriam behind a screen and pulled the curtains himself. Then, wearing his suavest of smiles, the magician strolled on to the platform.

Enthusiastic applause greeted the magician. Peering from the screen, Miriam saw Norgil step down from the platform to receive a gracious handshake from Ida Bannishaw. The dowager was portly and grayhaired; around her neck, which Norgil had been mild in terming ample, she wore the famed blue pearls.

Flash bulbs puffed as newspaper photographers shot pictures of the meeting from various angles. Miriam wondered who had arranged for the cameramen, Norgil or Mrs. Bannishaw, for both were capable at getting publicity. What interested her more, however, was Norgil's gaze.

It was centered on the pearls, and for once Miriam felt a shock, despite her confidence in Norgil. The magician's eyes had a hungry glint that reminded her of a beast of prey. He seemed to be counting those pearls, as if they were choice morsels that he intended to devour.

Then, Norgil was back on the stage, and Miriam received her cue to join him. The audience was quite intrigued by the appearance of the magician's brunette assistant. Miriam was wearing a Chinese costume, a contrast to Norgil's evening clothes. Ignoring the admiring murmurs from the male members of the audience, she began to assist Norgil in his routine of sleights.

The show went perfectly. Cigarettes, thimbles, coins appeared and vanished at the tips of Norgil's fingers. Borrowing a watch, Norgil vanished it; reclaimed the timepiece from the center box of a nest that had been suspended in full view, all during the show.

He handed the watch to Miriam; told her to return it to the owner. As Miriam came back to the stage, Norgil stepped from a screen wearing a pair of white gloves. Gasps came from the audience, as the magician plucked handfuls of cards from the air. The trick seemed doubly difficult with the gloves as a handicap.

Ida Bannishaw was seated at the right of the platform. The dowager beamed with delight as Norgil stepped down, produced a fistful of cards and dropped them in her lap. Norgil requested her to turn her chair toward the audience. As Mrs. Bannishaw complied, Norgil plucked more cards from her gray hair.

All the while, Norgil was working with one hand; his right. His gloved left hand was hanging at his side. Only Miriam, chancing to glance from behind the screen, saw the singular thing that followed.

A third hand, ungloved, crept from the back of Norgil's coat. It was a left hand, moving to the right. It reached the back of Mrs. Bannishaw's neck.

Deftly, that hand took the clasp of the pearl necklace, lifted it a fraction of an inch. It was raising the clasp to the point where fingers could work upon it, unnoticed.

Imperceptible to the audience's view, the pearls were creeping up the dowager's neck, as Norgil continued with his deft procedure. But the maneuver, skillful though it was, could be sensed by Mrs. Bannishaw.

She felt the pearls creep. To Miriam's complete horror, Mrs. Bannishaw clamped her hands upon the necklace, and uttered a wild, piercing shriek!

CHAPTER III
DEATH PLAYS A HAND

NORGIL'S sleight had failed. Never, in all his career, had the magician been in such a tight spot. Gladly, Miriam would have closed her eyes, but her tension kept them open. All sorts of gasps came from the spectators; men were springing to their feet, recognizing trouble.

In all that stress, with himself as the focal point, Norgil did not lose an ounce of coolness.

His right hand was plucking more cards from the air. His left, a fake thing with an empty glove, was resting by his side. He was stepping away from Mrs. Bannishaw as his third hand, actually the missing left, whished underneath his coat.

Turning, Norgil gazed at Mrs. Bannishaw, a look of concern replacing his suave expression. Half to her feet, the dowager dropped one hand to the chair arm and looked behind her. She stared toward Norgil, saw the cards in his right hand, observed his left still lowered.

"I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. Then waving towards the audience. "It's quite all right. It was just my imagination. I was worried"—she was smiling as she plucked the necklace—"about these precious pearls. I actually thought that someone had started to take them!"

The spectators laughed. No one could have touched those pearls. Only Norgil was close to Mrs. Bannishaw, and both of his hands were accounted for. Smiling, Norgil captured a last quota of cards from the atmosphere; letting them flutter to the platform, he strolled toward the screen where Miriam stood.

All the while, Norgil's missing hand was snugly up beneath his coat, never suspected by the audience; but behind the screen he met a defiant witness in the person of Miriam.

"I saw it!" There was emphasis to Miriam's undertone. "You were using the old pickpocket's trick of a dummy hand. You were trying to steal that necklace—"

"Just a gag," interposed Norgil, blandly. "If I did want the necklace"—his eyes met Miriam's sharply—"I wouldn't try to grab it in front of sixty people. Get out there, and do your turn. The crowd is waiting."

IN CHINESE FASHION, Miriam toddled to the center of the platform, carrying two sheets of tissue paper—one red, the other black. She tore the sheet into fragments, rolled them into a ball, and restored them in the shape of a tasseled coolie hat, which she placed on her head.

While Miriam was returning applause with a winsome smile, Norgil arrived in Chinese costume and makeup, carrying a fishing rod. He attached bait to the hook, flung the line out into the audience. A goldfish arrived, wiggling on the hook.

There were murmurs from the audience while Norgil dropped the live fish into a bowl that Miriam brought him. Another whip of the line produced another goldfish. The spectators were up from their chairs, staring amazedly at the repeated miracle. Blandly, Norgil hooked a third fish.

"I'll finish the act alone," Norgil was telling Miriam, tersely, from lips that scarcely moved. "Get the stuff from our room, and stow the dummy art at the bottom of the gray suitcase."

Lips compressed, Miriam nodded. She was angry, and wanted Norgil to know it. As soon as his act was finished, she intended to tell him all that she had heard, and demand a showdown. If he planned to go through with crooked work for Frenzel, he could wait until after Miriam had left the Bannishaw mansion.

Six fish were swimming in the bowl. Norgil tossed the fish bowl aside, and reached for a set of large steel rings that soon would link and come apart in very mystifying fashion. Holding the fish bowl into the light, Miriam threw a smile at the audience, set the bowl on a table and made a cute exit.

Her arms filled with props, among them the stuffed dummy glove, Miriam crossed the hall and reached the little office. She could hear the clang of the rings, and it annoyed her. Closing the door, Miriam put the dummy hand in the gray suitcase, then began to sort the remaining apparatus.

Vaguely, she heard voices. They came from beyond the connecting door that Claymore had locked. The voices stopped as Miriam listened. Odd, she thought, that people should be in that other room while the show was going on. Odd, too, the thudding sound, that came from beyond the door.

The little office was dim, lighted by a single lamp. Miriam stole toward the connecting door, keeping well away from the window, where a glow entered from the illuminated garden. Stealthily, she turned the key, then the knob. Opening the door was a problem that made her hesitate because of the light behind her, but finally she risked it.

Peering through the crack of the partly opened door, Miriam saw that the room beyond was dark. Its absolute silence denoted, too, that it was empty. Whoever had been there had probably gone out thorough another door, leading to the hall.

There was something, though, upon the floor; something that Miriam couldn't see very well because her own form blocked the light. Stepping into the room, Miriam approached the object, then stepped aside to let it show white in the light.

A moment later, she was horror-struck; too terrified to rise from the kneeling position that she had assumed. She was staring at the pale thing on the floor, her eyes wide open as she recognized it.

Miriam was looking at the pale, dead face of Byrd, the chauffeur who had tried to speak to Frenzel!

CHAPTER IV
CRIME STRIKES HOME

FAINTLY, as if from a far-off world, Miriam could hear the clash of steel. Norgil was in the middle of the ring routine, banging those solid loops, twisting them as if his whole future depended on the trick's success.

Here on the floor lay the real index to Norgil's future. Soon, Norgil's show would be a trivial recollection of the past; he would stand accused of murder!

The trip that Norgil had made from the platform, to change into the Chinese costume, would be sufficient to incriminate him—unless Miriam could somehow find evidence to prove that Norgil was not responsible for the crime.

Grimly, the girl remembered something that Frenzel had said, back at the Hayrick Club:

"If they make any trouble for you, I'll take care of them–"

The words were repeating themselves, over and over, in Miriam's memory. By "they," Frenzel had meant persons posted here at Bannishaw's. Miriam pictured three that she had seen very close to Frenzel–a chauffeur, a gardener and a waiter. Of the three, one was dead: Byrd, the chauffeur.

Byrd had made trouble. Someone had taken care of him. But it wouldn't be for Norgil's benefit. With murder done, crooks would hope to plant theft on Norgil, that he might take full blame. Bravely, Miriam decided that the first way to nullify that plan was to learn how Byrd had died.

Probing, she found blood upon the chauffeur's shirtfront. Looking more closely, Miriam saw a gaping wound, and knew that a knife had been driven to the victim's heart.

But the knife wasn't anywhere about. The killer had withdrawn it and made his exit while Miriam had been delaying her venture to this darkened room.

More distinct than the faint clatter of the Chinese rings, Miriam heard a creeping sound, back in the room that she had left. It could only be the murderer: he must have rounded the hallway and sneaked into the office from that direction.

Rigid, Miriam listened. The creep was fading away. Forgetting that the connection door must have betrayed her discovery of Byrd's body, Miriam hurried boldly toward the office. She was too late; the door to the hallway was closing.

Halfway to that very door, Miriam stopped.

It wouldn't do to rush out right into the arms of a killer who might be lurking in wait. Whether it was Frenzel or one of his friends, the result would prove disastrous, unless she prepared to make it otherwise.

Remembering a stage pistol in one of Norgil's suitcases, Miriam hurriedly obtained it. The gun wasn't loaded, but it would do for a bluff. Probably the killer's nerves were as tense as Miriam's own. She actually hoped that the murderer had remained in the hallway during the few minutes that she had wasted.

Reaching the door, Miriam gripped the knob. She felt it yield too easily; on an impulse she yanked the door inward. A crouching man came with it; before he could recover from his sprawl, Miriam had him covered. Triumphantly, the brunette eyed her captive as he lifted his hands.

The man was Frenzel!

THERE was an ugly glint to the fellow's eyes; his hands looked itchy, as if both wanted to reach for a gun at once. Miriam gestured him back across the office, toward the connecting door. Low, firmly, she ordered:

"Turn around."

Frenzel obeyed. Miriam poked his back with the pistol, forcing him through the doorway. As she guided him away from the light, Byrd's body showed in grim display. Frenzel turned half about; his sallow face had turned as white as the dead man's.

"No, no!" he began, in quavering tone. "If you'll only listen—"

"I'm listening," interrupted Miriam. She jabbed the gun toward Frenzel's heart. "Go right ahead. Confess that you killed Byrd!"

Frenzel's jitters ended. With a snarl, he made a frenzied dive, half across Byrd's body. He caught Miriam's wrist, shoving the empty gun upward. Unable to fire if she had wished to, Miriam took a back step, wrenched her hand away, as Frenzel stumbled over Byrd's shoulder.

Slugging downward with all the strength she could give, Miriam found the target that she wanted—Frenzel's broad forehead. The blow ended his stumble; it felled him. Coiled at Miriam's feet, Frenzel lay as inert as Byrd. Finding that he wasn't faking, Miriam stepped to the connection door and closed it.

THE gun tucked beneath her Chinese jacket, Miriam groped to the hallway door. She was afraid to go through the office because of possible accomplices outside its door. Reaching the hall, Miriam looked into the main door of the ballroom.

She saw the two detectives, standing close by. Beyond were the spectators, no longer in their chairs. Norgil had just finished the show, the curtains were closing. Ida Bannishaw was near the platform, both hands raised, calling out that she had an important announcement.

Miriam's first impulse was to double back through the hall and meet Norgil in the office that served as a drawing room. The sight of Mrs. Bannishaw halted her. The dowager looked very important, with the blue pearls gleaming at her neck. It might be that what she had to say would prove important, too.

"There will be a reception in the garden," shrilled Mrs. Bannishaw, "where we can all meet Norgil, and compliment him upon his remarkable performance. To the garden, everyone."

People turned. Miriam's eyes and those of a few others were still on Mrs. Bannishaw when the portly lady gave a scream far louder than the one that she had uttered earlier. Miriam spied the thing that many others saw, as they swung about.

A hand, thrust through the curtains, had caught hold of the blue pearl necklace. Boldly, it paused; then whipped the valued string clear of the neck that wore it. Snakelike, the necklace lashed the air, dangled a moment, then was gone!

Detectives lunged toward the curtains, in the midst of a dozen other men. As they reached the platform, every light in the ballroom was extinguished, pressed by a hand beyond the curtains!

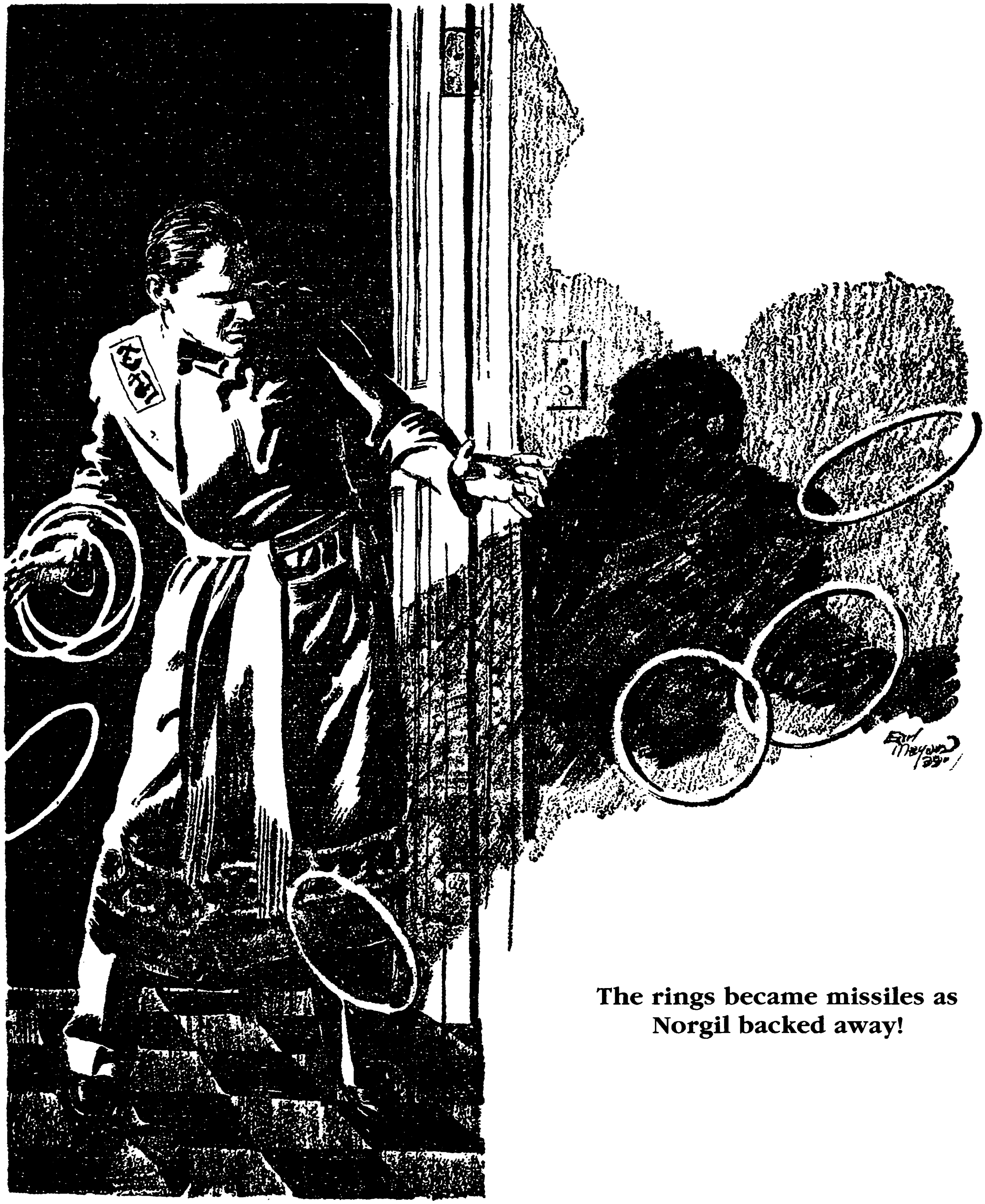
CHAPTER V
MURDER EVIDENCE

DOUBLING around through the hall, Miriam could see a throng stumble through from the platform. They came by the little door that she and Norgil had used to reach the improvised stage. Though the hall, too, was dark, they were visible, for the door was open to the office that Norgil had been given as a dressing room.

Norgil was stepping to the doorway as they came, still in his Chinese costume, a batch of steel rings hanging from his arm. As men grabbed at him, he warded them aside, the natural thing to do against such a furious onslaught.

The rings became missiles, as Norgil backed away. Not only did men dodge as he flung the loops of steel; they tripped in the bouncing rings, stumbling as they neared him, until one attacker, emboldened by the throng behind him, came leaping forward with tight clenched fists.

It was Claymore. The secretary made a few wild



The rings became missiles as Norgil backed away!

punches–then staggered away at Norgil's first swing. Striking against the floor lamp, Claymore overturned it, thereby providing the chance that others wanted.

Smashing, the lamp was immediately extinguished. In the darkness, detectives and others fell upon Norgil and flattened him. Claymore reached the window, smashed it with a smaller lamp that he had gathered from a table. He was flinging his arms wildly, shouting for help from outside, when others reached him with the news that Norgil was a prisoner.

Persons appeared in the garden. They were the ones who had started there, when the excitement began in the ballroom. Peering through the window, they learned what had happened. Their services weren't needed. Norgil was seated, quite subdued, amid a ring of captors.

They searched him for the necklace, but did not find a trace of it–until they probed an open suitcase. From the folds of a silk handkerchief, a blue bead fell and rolled along the floor. It was one of the missing pearls! The searches found three more.

Blandly, Norgil shook his head when detectives demanded that he produce the remaining pearls. There were no more, he said, and his smile increased as he let his gaze rove the room.

Then came the discovery of other gems, packed in the gray suitcase. Claymore recognized them. Looking about, the secretary said, hoarsely:

"Mrs. Bannishaw can identify these. Where is she?"

Learning that Mrs. Bannishaw had collapsed and been carried to her room, Claymore explained matters himself.

"They came from the safe," he said. "Norgil must have opened it. We'll find out when we look. The safe is in the adjoining room."

A detective opened the door and found an electric light switch. He pressed it, but no one looked in the direction that Claymore pointed, where a small wall safe gaped wide. Everyone was staring at the floor, where Byrd's body, gory in the light, was far more horrible than when Miriam had viewed it.

Frenzel was seated beside the body, rubbing a large bump on his forehead. He looked dazed, and Miriam bit her lips when she heard the buzz that came from onlookers. She had botched things badly, slugging Frenzel.

It looked as if the sallow man had been a victim of the same attacker who had slain Byrd. All eyes were turned toward Norgil as the two detectives lifted Frenzel to his feet. Though Norgil's suavity was still apparent, it was very far below par. Miriam had never seen him look so nearly helpless at that moment when Frenzel was sagging in the grip of lifting hands.

Then came a shout from the office. Searches had made another discovery; they were bringing a makeup towel from Norgil's gray bag. They had found it buried deep, and they were holding its contents on display.

Thrust beneath Norgil's eyes was the knife that had been missing when Miriam found Byrd's body. The blood that dyed the blade was proof that it was the death weapon.

Norgil tilted back his head and laughed.

From the stares men gave him, it was plain that they thought the magician's brain had cracked under the strain of overwhelming evidence. Miriam almost thought so; at least, she didn't understand the laugh–until she noticed Norgil's eyes. They were gazing straight at Frenzel, who had recovered form his stupor.

The laugh must have cleared the cobwebs from the sallow man's senses. He stared at Byrd's body, then at Norgil. Detectives were clamping handcuffs on Norgil's wrists; Frenzel leaped in between them. Miriam shrieked, despite herself, thinking that the man was starting another murderous attack.

Her surprise was complete when the detectives stepped back under Frenzel's persuasion, listening attentatively to the statements that the sallow man was pouring into their ears. Norgil, unmolested, was reaching into a pocket beneath his Chinese robe, to get a cigarette.

It was Frenzel who offered him a light!

CALMLY gesturing to the knife that lay in the towel, Norgil made the comment:

"You won't find my fingerprints on that."

"Of course not!" It was Claymore who blurted the accusation. "You were wearing gloves when you killed Byrd!"

"Gloves?" purred Norgil. "Why should anyone have needed gloves, when he intended to wipe the knife handle on a makeup towel?"

Something in Norgil's serenity impressed the others, though it made Claymore fume.

"As for the safe"—Norgil was gesturing toward the wall—"the man who killed Byrd unquestionably planted its contents in my bag, along with the knife."

"What about the pearls?" demanded Claymore. "They came from Mrs. Bannishaw's necklace, after you stole it!"

"Not so fast." Norgil was looking at the pearls. "Those four pearls were missing from the necklace when Mrs. Bannishaw wore it tonight. Suppose you call the newspaper office"—he was turning to Frenzel—"and ask them to check the photographs that they took from different angles. There were only twenty pearls on the necklace. I counted them."

Sheer boldness, it appeared, was carrying Norgil through: but listeners were inclined to believe him. He had performed mysteries for their benefit only a half hour before; now, he was unraveling one. Norgil's cause was in the balance; one more stroke of showmanship would clench it. Coolly, Norgil provided the very element needed.

"I begin to understand the circumstances," said the magician. "Someone seized Mrs. Bannishaw's necklace, with its twenty pearls, and headed across the hall. I was trapped, but didn't have the pearls. Suppose"–he smiled to the entire group–"that I regained those pearls from a place where I could not possibly have placed them. Would that convince you of my innocence?"

It would. Most of the listeners agreed to it. Norgil turned to Miriam.

"We're going to the garden," he said. "Bring the fish pole that I used in the Chinese act. Stay right with me, Claymore"—he gripped the secretary's arm—"because I know that you are going to appreciate this experiment."

Norgil was standing beside the outdoor fish pool when Miriam arrived with the pole. Baiting the hook with a pellet of bread that was lying by the pool, Norgil flung the line into the water. A dozen fish snapped at the bait. Norgil yanked the unlucky winner from the pool.

Finishing the fish by thwacking its head against the pool edge, Norgil handed it to one of the detectives, with the order to cut it open. The dick looked at Frenzel, who nodded. Slitting the fish, the detective made a grab at something blue. Catching it, he opened his fist—to stare at a missing pearl!

"Luck on the first cast," remarked Norgil. "We shall find nineteen more fish that gobbled pearls, when the shower of unusual food came from the window—"

He was pointing to the office window that Claymore had smashed before giving the unneeded shout for help. Claymore had acted frantically then; he was really frenzied now. Not waiting to hear the rest, the drab secretary whipped a revolver from his hip, and yelled:

"Stand where you are!"

Everyone obeyed the order except the man who uttered it. Claymore had forgotten the hand that again clutched his elbow. The hand was Norgil's.

A QUICK forearm shove from the magician, plus a sidekick against the secretary's ankle, and Claymore was no longer a threat. He was floundering, gun and all, in the fish pool, and half a dozen men were piling in to suppress him. He was half-drowned and bedraggled when they brought him out, totally unable to admit the crimes that he could no longer deny.

Norgil covered those details as he rode back to town with Miriam and Frenzel, with the luggage following in another cab. As a prelude, Miriam found out, to her amazement, who Frenzel really was. The sallow man was general manager of the insurance company that had issued the fifty thousand dollar policy on the Bannishaw pearls. The men that he had mentioned weren't accomplices; they were the detectives stationed at the mansion.

"You are right," Norgil told Frenzel. "With the policy expiring in a few days, Ida Bannishaw saw her chance to collect fifty thousand dollars, almost twice the best offer given her, and keep the pearls as well.

"When you offered me five hundred dollars to get the necklace and turn it over to you, I knew that the plan was safe enough. If honest, Ida Bannishaw would have accepted explanations; if crooked, she wouldn't have dared to make trouble.

"But when I saw that there were only twenty pearls—when I tested the clasp and found it wouldn't open—I changed the plan. I was relying upon Miriam"—he gave the girl a smiling glance—"to watch the pearls during the few minutes that I took to change my costume. It happened that Miriam had run into problems of her own."

"Like I did," acknowledged Frenzel, rubbing his forehead, "and our misadventures happened to fit with Claymore's plan. He planted the knife, along with the jewels and the extra pearls, before Miriam and I met."

"Which gave him his big chance," added Norgil, "to grab the necklace that Ida Bannishaw had so obligingly unclasped, and lead the trail to me."

"But what about Byrd?" asked Miriam. "Did Mrs. Bannishaw tell Claymore to murder him?"

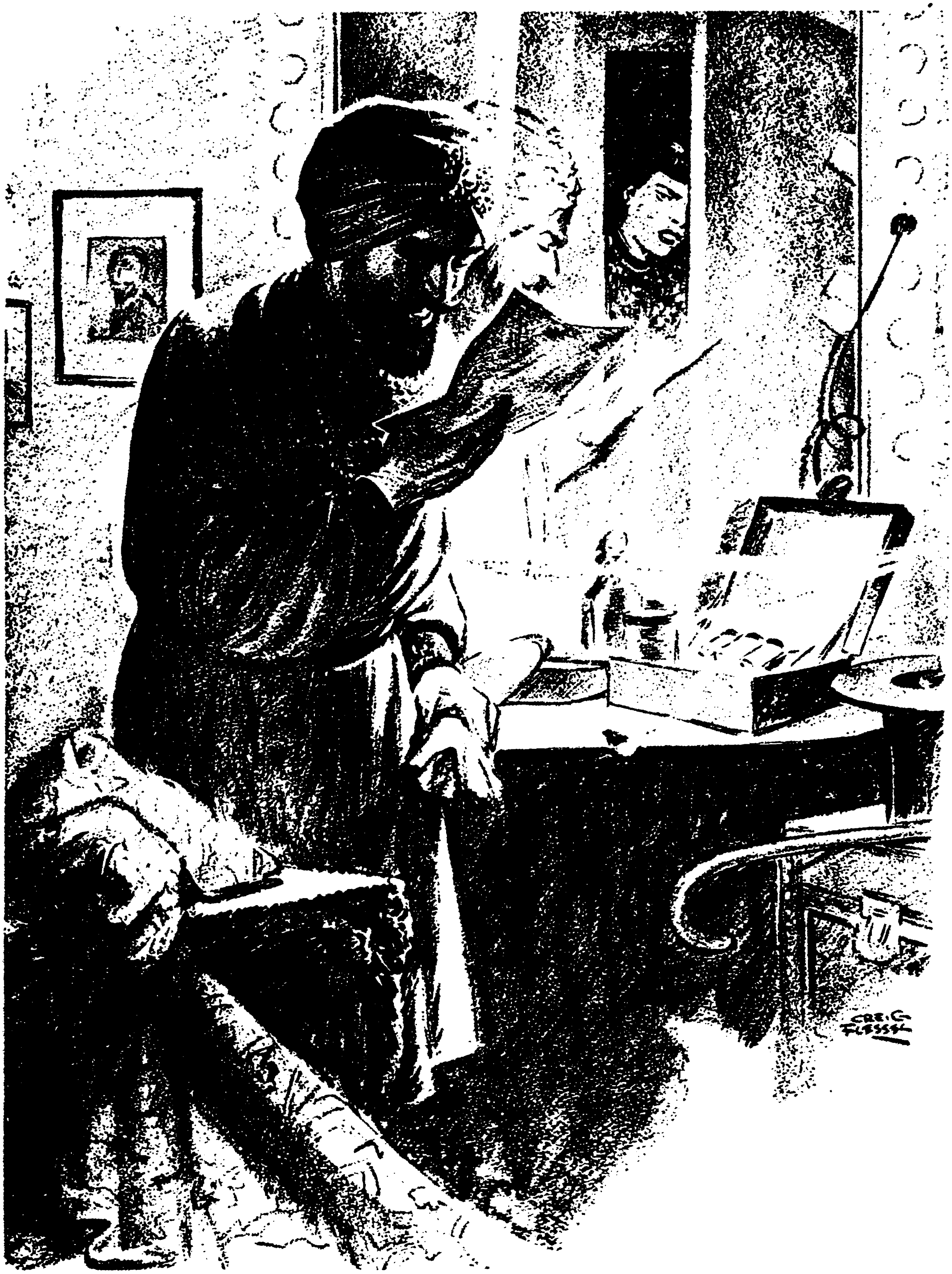
"I doubt it," put in Frenzel. "Byrd guessed the game; when he tried to talk to me, Claymore took him to Mrs. Bannishaw. She probably agreed to pay him for silence, but Claymore, confident that he could frame Norgil, decided on a cheaper way."

Miriam sighed as she turned to Norgil.

"How stupid I was!" she exclaimed. "I actually thought you were being hired to become a crook!"

"So I was," smiled Norgil. "By Ida Bannishaw!"

THE END


CRAIG FLESSEL

A magician could tell that there was

CRIME IN THE CRYSTAL

A NORGIL NOVELETTE

by MAXWELL GRANT

CHAPTER I
THE SWAMI'S PROPHECY

The Iris Theater, pride of Border City, was packed to the doors, with hundreds of people thronging the streets, listening to the voice that carried through big amplifiers. Half the population of the Texas town had shown up to witness, or hear, the final performance of Swami Zoram, the celebrated mind reader.

There was another celebrity present—Norgil the Magician. He was in the audience, and his present claim to distinction was the fact that he had managed to get himself into the theater, along with his leading lady, Miriam Laymond. Yet the credit for that feat rightfully belonged to Swami Zoram.

Norgil and Miriam had been admitted only because the magician carried a special pass for two, which Swami Zoram had sent him the day before.

Swami Zoram claimed to be a master of the Orient. He had, at least, borrowed plentifully from the East. He wore a Hindu costume, with a garish turban; his stage set had a pair of Chinese Buddhas, seated on taborets; while the backdrop represented the Egyptian Sphinx. But the hodgepodge did not disturb the audience.

They were interested solely in the bearded swami, as he stalked the stage, gazing into a crystal ball, and turning his glittering eyes upon the audience. People were whispering questions to a girl in Japanese costume, and Swami Zoram was getting the answers from the crystal ball.

The swami termed the girl his "Psychic Eye," and only two members of the audience knew that her simple requests for answers supplied Swami Zoram with the actual questions. The two who knew were Norgil and Miriam; they talked about it, when they left the theater, after the show.

"I don't know which is more marvelous," declared Norgil. "The way Swami Zoram sells that old code act, or the way the audience fell for the hokum."

"Calling the numbers on dollar bills was good," conceded Miriam. "He read them as fast as the girl gave them."

"Which is quite usual," returned Norgil. "The dollar bill stunt has more whiskers on it than the swami's phony beard."

Mention of the false beard surprised Miriam. She had supposed that the swami's crop was real. But Norgil had known the swami long ago, before he had adopted the name of Zoram. Therefore, Miriam reasoned, Norgil ought to know about the whiskers, too.

They waited in the lobby of the Border City Hotel until Swami Zoram arrived and strode pompously through. The swami had changed to street clothes, but he still had his brown, spade-shaped beard, and it looked very real to Miriam. At the desk Norgil bought a copy of a local newspaper then inquired the number of the swami's room. He motioned to Miriam and they went upstairs.

Outside the swami's room Norgil paused, his hand half-lifted to knock. He and Miriam heard the smooth, oily tone of Swami Zoram on the telephone.

"Twenty-five grand?" The words carried a sneer. "Not a chance... I said fifty, and it stands... Get this. By the end of next week, it will be a hundred... Yes, you'll find out why—"

The receiver *clicked.* The swami gave a low, knowing chuckle, the sort that he used on stage, when he answered difficult questions. Outside the door, Miriam looked at Norgil; her eyes were really wide. The magician gestured for silence; waited a half minute before he knocked at the door.

Swami Zoram received them with a long, enthusiastic laugh, indicating that he regarded Norgil as an old friend. Finishing a hearty handshake, the fake Hindu tugged away his false beard, and tossed it on a table. Miriam studied a sallow, roundish face, that had every mark of shrewdness.

"I want to talk to you about next week," declared Swami Zoram, glibly. "I hear you're opening at the Orpheus Theater, in New Orleans."

Norgil nodded.

"I've booked into the Apollo," continued Zoram. "It's right next door to the Orpheus. I've got a favor to ask you—"

"I understand," inserted Norgil, his own tone a suave purr. "You want me to lay off, and not expose you as a faker. That's up to you, Zoram. If you do a straight act, purely for entertainment, I won't bother you.

"But if you pull off phony stuff, like this"—Norgil was tapping the Border City newspaper—"I'll challenge you to prove it. That's final, Zoram."

Swami Zoram took the newspaper, glanced at the headlines, and laughed. The newspaper carried a picture of the swami, with his prediction that Border City would be shaken by a great explosion in the dead of night. The swami hadn't given the precise date, but he had prophesied that the blast would occur within a fortnight.

"Just a publicity stunt," said Zoram. "I learned that nitro trucks are being routed past Border City, to the oil fields. They go through at three in the morning. Sooner or later, one will blow up, close enough to wake everybody in town. When that happens"—he tapped his chest with his thumb—"people will remember that Swami Zoram predicted it."

"Very cute," acquiesced Norgil, "but lay off that sort of hokum in New Orleans."

"That's understood," agreed Zoram. His tone, for once, was frank. "But that wasn't the favor I wanted to ask. My Psychic Eye has quit. She's taking a train to the coast tonight. I've got to get another girl; that's why I wanted you to see the show tonight."

Zoram looked at Miriam as he spoke, and his meaning was quite plain. He knew that Norgil had performed the mental act in legitimate style, with Miriam as assistant. With Norgil playing in the next door theater to Zoram's, it seemed reasonable that the magician might lend him Miriam, to work in the act.

Particularly reasonable, since Miriam herself would be able to check on Zoram's act and make sure that he did not deal in phony predictions, or encourage theater patrons to visit him for worthless private readings at five dollars apiece.

In pressing his request, Zorarm produced some typewritten sheets that contained all the code methods used in his act. He was quite sure that Miriam could learn the whole system within the next few days. Zoram's plea was genuine enough; he was really on a spot and needed help. But Norgil decided to reserve decision.

"We'll talk it over," said the magician. "Give me a call when you get to New Orleans, Zoram."

Downstairs, Norgil and Miriam had a late supper in the coffee shop. It was midnight when they started their moonlight drive to New Orleans; a trip of some three hundred miles. Norgil settled on a fifty-mile-an-hour pace, to get them there by dawn. But fifty seemed a creep compared to the speed of the car that whizzed past them near the outskirts of Border City.

The speeding car was a sleek coupé that formed a glittery streak in the moonlight as it shot across the brow of a hill ahead. Norgil calculated that it was doing better than seventy, but he didn't criticize the driver. On a clear road, a high speed seemed safe enough for anyone who preferred it.

Norgil liked fifty, because he could chat while he drove, and he had an important subject on his mind.

"It's easy to guess why the girl quit," he told Miriam. "Zoram is mixed in some racket, and she wanted to get clear. That talk of his fifty thousand dollars or double was the real tipoff. I'd like to know what's in back of it."

"If I worked in Zoram's act," began Miriam, "I might—"

"You might run into trouble," inserted Norgil. "I wouldn't want you to take the risk, Miriam; not unless we were out to solve something very big. As big a crime as murder—"

Miriam's hand grabbed Norgil's wrist—so forcibly that she jarred the wheel. The girl was pointing from her window; but she couldn't find words to tell what she saw. Norgil took the whole thing in with a glance.

They were at the brow of the hill. Ahead, the road dipped, weaving an irregular course beneath the moonlight. A mile away it twisted upward, to the left, to begin a sharp right curve around a blunt hillside. The speeding coupé was a pygmy object, driving rapidly for the bend. Its driver couldn't see the obstacle that Miriam and Norgil observed from their hilltop.

A large, oddly-shaped truck had poked across the road, covering both lanes at the sharpest section of the curve. A midnight tragedy was in the making, and there was no way to warn the driver of the coupé. Before Miriam could close her horrified eyes, she felt Norgil's steadying grip. The coupé had taken the curve.

They saw the car lurch into a spin, then skew toward the stalled truck like a chunk of iron drawn by a magnet. Miriam expected the coupé to crunch into a twist of wreckage, but it didn't. Instead, the car and the truck vanished—so suddenly that it reminded Miriam of one of Norgil's stage tricks.

Then the whole countryside thundered with a blast that ricocheted in deafening waves from the slopes. The ground quivered as though rocked by an earthquake. The very road seemed to contort itself as Norgil brought his own car to a stop.

The sleek coupé had struck a nitroglycerin truck, abolishing both vehicles in the twinkling of an eye. The roars from that tragic blast were carrying back to Border City, as proof that the prophecy of Swami Zoram had been fulfilled!

CHAPTER II
THE PSYCHIC EYE

Miriam Laymond sat by her hotel window, staring out over New Orleans. The low buildings of the level city were a blur before her gaze. Her eyes were fixed on the broad bend of the brown-hued Mississippi, beyond the high-built levee. It helped her concentrate as she repeated the code words needed in the swami's act.

With a shake of her head, Miriam came from her half-trance. She rubbed her forehead, and laid aside the sheets of paper. She had memorized the system well enough; further effort might confuse what she had learned. This was the day that Zoram's show opened; the afternoon was well along, and there would just be time for dinner before the evening performance.

Miriam tried to think of other things. She remembered that night in Border City, the last time she had seen Swami Zoram. Despite herself, she visualized the scene on the highway, the vanishing of the truck and the coupé. Somehow, the aftermath had seemed worse than the actual tragedy.

Norgil and Miriam had been the only witness of the explosion; but other people had come along to help them search the ground. They hadn't found a trace of vehicles or victims; not even a fragment of a license plate to identify the driver of the coupé.

That was the way when a nitro truck exploded; though Miriam wouldn't have believed it if she hadn't seen the evidence—or lack of it. A dollar a mile, they paid the drivers, with a passport to oblivion every time a cargo set out. But this blast had been different. Maybe the driver had fled his truck and decided to remain unlocated, after the coupé hit it.

The authorities were still investigating the case. So far, they had found a fragment of a hub cap and the knob of a gearshift lever, on a hillside half a mile from the scene. A rather slow rate of assembly, but they were keeping at it.

No one had linked Zoram with the tragedy. The swami's prophecy hadn't impressed the law. Had the explosion occurred while Zoram was still in Border City, enabling the swami to do bigger business as a result of his prediction, there might have been some questions. But Zoram hadn't capitalized on his publicity.

Norgil, alone, saw deeper into the game. He knew facts about Swami Zoram that others didn't. Which explained why Norgil had decided to let Miriam work in the mind reader's act.

New Orleans was agleam when Miriam finished dinner. Walking along Canal Street, the city's broad and brilliant main thoroughfare, Miriam turned into a side street and reached the Thespian Arcade, a relic of old New Orleans. The arcade was the entrance to a patio where two theaters were located—the Apollo and the Orpheus.

The twin playhouses formed an intriguing sight. On the left of the wide patio was the lobby of the Apollo, where bombastic showbills and garish lithographs heralded the engagement of Swami Zoram, the sensation of the Orient, who could see all, tell all.

On the right, the lobby of the Orpheus Theater presented a conservative display. Norgil, the celebrated magician, was billed with a feature picture, and the lobby frames held tasteful photographs showing the various illusions that made up the magic act. Miriam entered the Orpheus and went backstage. She wanted to talk with Norgil before she saw Swami Zoram.

Norgil had just finished the supper show. Miriam found him in his dressing room. Greeting her with a smile, Norgil pointed across a tiny courtyard to a lighted window on the other side. Miriam could see the outline of a big trunk against the frosted pane.

"The swami's dressing room," announced Norgil. "His nibs just showed up. Left a message with the doorman here at the Orpheus"—Norgil drew a sheet of paper from an envelope—"reminding me that he's counting on you. How about the homework? Did you learn it?"

Smiling, Miriam nodded. She handed Norgil the code sheets and let him check the key words that she repeated.

"Good enough," decided Norgil. "Good enough for Zoram, anyway. His act is mostly hokum. He's doing an hour and a half, and you'll only have to work at intervals."

"What will he fill in with?"

"He's rigged a crystal act," replied Norgil, "with a couple of local boys, made up as Hindus, to swipe written questions from the audience. He's doing a hyp stunt, too, using horses, mostly. Terrible, but the public eats it."

"You'll catch the show?"

"Part of it," decided Norgil. "I'm going out to dinner first. I'll have to leave, though, before Zoram finishes, because our last show starts just after he winds up."

Leaving the rear of the Orpheus Theater, Miriam entered the stage door of the Apollo, and found her dressing room. She found a trig Japanese costume awaiting her, and after she had finished with her makeup, no one would have known her. Yellowish greasepaint, a Number Sixteen, produced the proper complexion, while strips of transparent tape, drawn outward, enabled Miriam to give her eyes an almond shape.

Miriam was stepping to the stage when she saw an usher knock at the door of Zoram's dressing room. The swami poked his bearded face in sight; he was wearing his jeweled turban above it. The usher handed him an envelope, with the comment: "From Mr. Clarry."

"Who is Mr. Clarry?" queried Zoram in a smooth tone, which made Miriam decide that the swami already knew who Clarry was. "Why should he send me a message?"

"He's the new man handling the box office," replied the usher. "He said to give you the envelope; that's all I know."

With the usher gone, Miriam approached Zoram's door. It was slightly ajar, for it had failed to latch when Zoram closed it. Through the crack, the girl saw the bearded swami at his dressing table eagerly opening the envelope.

It held a sheet of paper with long rows of figures which Zoram checked by key numbers that accompanied them, after reading a note that came with the sheet. Turning to a small pedestal that held a crystal ball, Zoram drew back a slide in the base and began to copy the line of figures on a roll of paper that moved along when his thumb manipulated a tiny cog wheel in the pedestal.

Miriam was on stage when Zoram arrived there. The swami's eyes showed a pleased gleam when he viewed the attractive assistant who was to serve as his Psychic Eye. He checked the code with Miriam and gave a satisfied nod.

"Excellent," decided Zoram. "I take five minutes for my opening spiel. When I polish the crystal, it's your cue to enter."

The curtain rose. For half a minute, Miriam stood at the wing, watching the swami and the two imitation Hindus who flanked him, looking very uncomfortable in their ill-fitting Oriental costumes. Then, while Swami Zoram was droning to the audience, promising that he would actually see all and tell it, Miriam acted on impulse.

She glided back to the swami's dressing room. In the wastebasket, she found the crumpled sheet that bore the rows of figures and the key numbers. Promptly, Miriam recognized what they signified.

The long rows were the serial numbers of five- and ten-dollar bills; the keys that went with them represented the location of theater seats. Dropping the list back in the wastebasket. Miriam spread the note that she found.

It read:

> Here are the numbers of the phonies. Twenty-five ought to be enough tonight. Don't forget to sprinkle them, like you said. Some of the boys are in the audience. Clarry
>
> PS: Just planted a couple more. Seat J 3: F800748162A; H 22: F263631992A.

Crumpled tight in Miriam's palm, Clarry's note seemed to carry a burning tingle. Just what it meant the girl couldn't quite decide; but the whole thing spelled danger. So did the voice of Swami Zoram, which was reaching a high, excited pitch, as Miriam heard it from the stage. Chucking the note, Miriam hurried from the dresssing room. She reached the wing just as Zoram began to polish the crystal ball.

Mechanically, Miriam stepped on stage. She found herself going down the steps, into the audience. People were handing her objects, she was asking the swami to name them. Her mind was back in the hotel room. She could visualize the muggy river, off beyond her window. She was using the right words; for Zoram called everything.

"A pencil... a watch—" The monotony of Zoram's drone almost maddened Miriam. "A coin; a half dollar. Its date is 1909—"

Miriam received a dollar bill. When she asked Zoram what it was, he named the denomination. She called for the serial number; he gave four figures, then the rest, after Miriam insisted that he concentrate.

The stunt scored an instant hit. Wherever Miriam turned, money was shoved toward her. Seated on his throne, Zoram gazed into the crystal and kept on naming bills and numbers. Finishing with a five-dollar bill that a lady handed Miriam, Zoram added, crisply:

"Wait!"

Miriam saw a motion of the swami's thumb. His eyes glistened as he raised them. Looking straight toward the lady who owned the five-dollar bill, Zoram spoke, emphatically:

"I see more, through the aid of my Psychic Eye. That bill is worthless, madam. Take it to your bank, tomorrow, and say that I declared it to be counterfeit. Prove for yourself that Swami Zoram sees all —and tells!"

CHAPTER III
DEATH RIDES ANEW

A buzz swept through the audience; so sharp, that the atmosphere seemed to tingle with an electric charge. Miriam could hear a crackle; it came from currency that people were thrusting back into their pockets.

Then Zoram's oily tone:

"Anymore bills? Let me view them through my Psychic Eye, enlarge them with the magnifying power of the crystal. Skeptics have offered thousands of dollars, hoping to prove that I can be wrong. You can make the test for a mere five dollars."

The challenge brought response. More bills were coming Miriam's way. With each, Zoram paused dramatically after he had named the serial number; then announced whether the bill was genuine or not.

Bigger bills were being tendered. Zoram detected a few spurious tens. To Miriam, the act became an ordeal. She was actually in the audience; could feel the tenseness all about her. Some people, those who had put their money away, were drawing back when she approached, as though they feared evil from the Psychic Eye.

Abruptly, Swami Zoram arose from his throne; he had decided that the game had gone far enough. The imitation Hindus began to pass pads and envelopes among the audience so that Zoram could answer written questions. Gratefully, Miriam ascended the steps and went off stage.

She wanted to talk to Norgil, but knew that she would have to wait. At any moment, Zoram might call for his Psychic Eye, and Miriam could be in the act again. In fact, Zoram did summon her; she was on stage and off, all during the show, even while he, the swami, performed his hypnotic act with the assistance of stupid-looking confederates who came from the audience; the men that Norgil had termed "horses."

When the show was over, Miriam hurriedly discarded her Japanese costume and disposed of her makeup. She was grateful to be back in her own clothes and anxious to report to Norgil. She thought it good policy, though, to speak to Zoram before she left.

Still wearing his swami's regalia, Zoram chuckled when he saw Miriam. He congratulated her on the excellent assistance that she had given; then, in dry tone, he remarked:

"That hokum about the counterfeit money fetched them. It's the stuff that makes people talk. We'll have a packed house tomorrow night."

Miriam's eyes narrowed.

"You mean that those bills weren't counterfeit?"

"How should I know?" asked Zoram, with a shrug. "I didn't see them, did I? I know human nature; nobody likes to get stuck with counterfeit cash. None of those saps will go near a bank to find out whether I was right or wrong."

Leaving, Miriam closed Zoram's door. As before, it failed to latch. But she had no advantage in the fact, until she was halfway to the stage door. Then she heard the ringing of a telephone bell. Remembering that there was a phone in Zoram's dressing room, Miriam tiptoed back to the starred door.

She saw Zoram, his hand lifting from the wastebasket, where he had reclaimed Clarry's note, and the list of counterfeit bills. He reached for the telephone, and spoke; then, Miriam heard him chuckle.

"Thirty grand, eh?" queried Zoram. "A better offer. Still, it's not enough... Fifty grand was the price... So you're not worried? Funny that you raised the ante, if you weren't... Better call me up tomorrow night. See how you feel about it"—Zoram's rolled tone changed to a sneer—"after I've staged the same kind of show that I put on tonight."

Miriam was on her way when the telephone receiver *clicked.* She heard Zoram's door jar tightly in place; the key turn in the lock. Reaching the other theater, she knocked at the door of Norgil's dressing room. The sound of the magician's cheery voice was such a contrast to Zoram's ominous tone that Miriam gave a sigh of happy relief.

Norgil was dressing for the show. He came from his dressing room a few minutes later sliding his arms into a stiff shirt. Miriam motioned him back into the dressing room; began to tie his white necktie for him. Knowing that Norgil would warn her if anyone approached, she whispered the details of all that had happened in the Apollo Theater. Norgil grimaced.

"I should have caught Zoram's show," he undertoned. "But I fell for one of those nine-course dinners at Gallion's Cafe. Oysters Rockfeller, trout Marguery"—Norgil shook his head, at recollection of the repast. "But we'll have a dinner like it, Miriam, after we settle this Zoram mess."

"You think it really is a mess?"

"No doubt about it, Miriam. Those bills were counterfeit; otherwise that chap Clarry wouldn't have sent the note and list to Zoram. Clarry must have planted the bad bills in the change he gave people at the box office, and he checked the serials with the numbers of the seats he sold them."

"But what can the game be?"

"We'll talk about that"—Norgil was reaching for his coat and vest, as the overture commenced—"after I've finished my own show."

Miriam went out into the theater. It seemed odd to be watching Norgil's show from the front of the house. With other matters preying on her mind, she gained a sudden resolve. Going out through the lobby of the Orpheus Theater, Miriam chose an obscure bench across the patio and gained a slanted view of the Apollo lobby next door.

She could see the window of the box office; a wise-faced man behind it. The fellow was evidently Clarry; Miriam watched him open the window, and snap his fingers. An usher arrived; Clarry gave him a metal box.

"Take this up to the manager's office," ordered Clarry, in a harsh monotone. "I'm leaving for the night."

Producing a derby hat, Clarry stalked toward the arcade, not noticing Miriam. Clarry's eyes had suddenly fixed on two loungers, farther along the arcade. They galvanized as he approached; separating, each gripped one of Clarry's elbows.

They weren't quite out of Miriam's sight, especially when Clarry drew back. As the pair restrained Clarry, the fellow lost his wise air. Miriam heard him stammer:

"Who... who are you?"

"Just a couple of friends," returned one. "We're going places; thought you'd like to come along."

"You ought to remember us," put in the other. "We used to play at your table when you were dealing faro over at the Club Scimitar."

Catching a glimpse of Clarry's turning face, Miriam saw the fellow suppress his nervous look. His "friends" paraded him out through the arcade to a waiting touring car, where two men were in the front seat. Suddenly shoved into the rear, Clarry made a sudden break, only to be suppressed. As the car shot away, the man beside the driver reached back and gave a poke at Clarry.

Miriam heard a sound that could have been a backfire of the motor. There was a shriek of brakes; then rapid footsteps on the sidewalk. One of the chunky men came into sight; stooped to pick up something that had fallen into the gutter. Peering past the corner of the arcade, Miriam saw the object as the fellow hurried back to the touring car. The thing was Clarry's derby hat.

His show over, Norgil heard Miriam's tale of tragedy. He nodded agreement with her theory that death had ridden anew, with Clarry as the victim. He was particularly interested when he learned that one of Clarry's captors had mentioned the Club Scimitar.

"Quite a spot," remarked Norgil. "The Club Scimitar is the only gambling house in New Orleans that's running wide open. It's run by a fellow named Rick Althorp, and he's invited me over there. Let's go, Miriam."

When they reached the Club Scimitar, Norgil was greeted by a tall, long-faced man, whose darkish lips held a perpetual smile. He was Rick Althorp, the proprietor, and he bowed to Miriam when he learned that she was a Member of Norgil's company. Rick suggested that they try their luck at roulette; soon, Miriam was forgetting past troubles as she watched the fascinating gyrations of the bouncing ball.

Norgil was more interested in the other players. Luck was good tonight; everyone seemed to have a share in it. Occasionally, players had to buy more chips, but they eventually cashed in as winners.

Such was true with Norgil and Miriam. Though they had not played for high stakes, they found their initial investment nearly doubled when they cashed in their chips.

They stopped at the door to say good night to Rick Althorp. The gambler was chatting with a square-shouldered man who turned out to be a police officer in plainclothes. Althorp introduced him as Lieutenant Carpenter; then, in a tone so suave that it seemed the vocal embodiment of his permanent smile, the gambler spoke to the police lieutenant.

"Sorry to hear about Clarry," said Althorp. "I was afraid he'd get killed in one of those dives along the riverfront."

"Why did he go down there?" queried Carpenter.

"For supplies," returned Althorp. "He could buy dope cheaper from the fellows who peddled it off the boats."

"How long had he been a drug addict?"

"I don't know. I found it out a month ago and had to let him go. A hophead won't do as a faro dealer. I suppose he picked up a job somewhere, because I hadn't seen him lately."

Norgil had very little to say while he and Miriam rode along Canal Street in their cab. It was when they reached the girl's hotel that the magician made a speculative remark, just before he said good night.

"I wonder," said Norgil, "how Swami Zoram is going to handle his act tomorrow night."

CHAPTER IV
NORGIL'S CHALLENGE

There was no envelope from the box office the next evening, but Swami Zoram did not seem worried by its absence. Just before curtain time, the bearded faker drew Miriam aside.

"The house is packed," he told her, "all on account of that counterfeit money gag. I'm going to work it stronger tonight, but I don't want to ruin it. So remember, every time they give you a new bill, shift it to your left hand. Keep old ones in your right."

People were producing money from the moment that Miriam went down the steps into the audience. The newspapers had not mentioned Zoram's ability to detect counterfeit money by psychic power, but evidently the news had traveled by word of mouth. The audience expected Zoram to repeat the stunt, and he did not fail them.

Miriam noted that the bills he classed as counterfeits were all fives or tens, and new ones. Sheer bluff, of course, but it worked. Miriam noted certain men in the audience who conferred with companions before pocketing their money. In some cases they wrote down the numbers of the bills.

After the show, Zoram received another phone call that Miriam overheard. Someone was offering to settle for forty thousand, but the swami rejected the bid. Fifty grand was still his price, and tomorrow it might be doubled. Miriam carried the news to Norgil. From his dressing room, the magician stared across to Zoram's lighted window, then glanced at his watch.

"Just time enough before the act," he decided. "I'm going to give that fake a jolt. Come on, Miriam."

There was no telephone in Norgil's dressing room, so he used a pay station in the lobby. He called the theater next door, and asked for Swami Zoram. Miriam could hear Norgil's voice, through the door of the telephone booth.

"When I said no funny business," declared Norgil, "I meant it, Zoram. Don't try to alibi yourself. Miriam tells me you're faking that stuff about the counterfeit bills... Legitimate? Maybe you call it that, but I don't... You won't quit? All right, Zoram, whatever happens, you've asked for it."

Stepping from the phone booth, Norgil paused before going backstage. He told Miriam to call all the newspapers, and ask that each send a representative to meet him at his hotel immediately after the last show.

There were headlines the next morning. Norgil had challenged Zoram to prove himself a mind reader under test conditions. The plan was simple. Norgil was to provide a large, soundproof box, and a committee was to lock Zoram inside it, with his crystal ball, a flashlight, a pad of paper, and a pencil.

Questions were to be written by the committee before Zoram was in the box. The swami could stay inside as long as he wanted; but when he rapped, the committeemen would open a slide from the outside. It would then be Zoram's turn to push out sheets of paper, bearing answers to the questions. If they tallied, Norgil would concede that Zoram was a genuine mind reader.

At noon, Norgil called in the newspapermen and told them that he had heard from Zoram. The swami was willing to undertake the test, provided that it was held in his own theater, with the stage blacked out and the committee stationed among the audience. There was another proviso. Zoram was willing to forfeit five thousand dollars, if he failed; but, should he succeed, he would expect Norgil to hand over that amount of money.

"I'll take him up on it," affirmed Norgil. "We'll hold the test tonight, if I can be ready that soon."

"What's holding you up?" inquired a reporter. "Won't you have time to build the box?"

"I'll have the box," assured Norgil grimly. "What I need is time to raise the five thousand dollars."

Half an hour later, Norgil was chatting with Rick Althorp in a little office at the rear of the Club Scimitar. The smiling gambler opened a safe when he heard the reason for the magician's visit.

"Here is the five thousand, Norgil," declared Rick. "Your proposition of ten percent sounds good to me, provided"—the gambler's eyes were sharp—"that you're sure Zoram can't win."

"How can he?" argued Norgil. "The box will be soundproof, and the committee will have the key."

"Suppose he has some radio gimmick—"

"It won't do him any good. The questions will be written, not spoken. I've chosen the committeemen! Zoram can't bribe them."

Rick began to stroke his chin; he was very nearly convinced that Norgil was right. Leaning across the desk, the magician met the final objection before Rick could present it.

"Blacking out the stage won't help Zoram," declared Norgil. "Maybe he thinks he can get out of the box, and sneak down into the audience. But not with my box. I know the methods of escape artists too well to allow any loophole."

"But other persons could approach the box—"

"And open it? Not a chance. The lock will be sealed, just in case. The only thing that Zoram's pals might do"— Norgil chuckled at the thought—"is sneak the box off stage in the dark, and take it away on a truck. It would be a nice way for Zoram to get out of town, and save what he calls his reputation."

Joining in the laugh, Rick handed Norgil the bundle of money and clapped the magician on the shoulder. Norgil signed a promissory note for forty-five hundred dollars and hurried back to his hotel to confer with the committee.

Again, as on the previous evening, Swami Zoram performed before a full house. Assisted by his Psychic Eye, he repeated his detection of counterfeit money in the audience, but no one was greatly interested. The whole audience was looking forward to the box test that was to follow the shortened regular show.

Quite incognito in her Japanese costume, Miriam stationed herself in a side aisle of the theater, when a curtain rose to disclose the soundproof box that Norgil had sent to Zoram's theater. Norgil had told Miriam to watch the test from the audience, as he would be getting ready for his own act, next door.

Swami Zoram was in his most sneery mood. He studied the square, light-built box that he was to enter, gave his crystal ball a twirl, and seated himself within the wooden prison.The committeemen handed him a flashlight, pad and pencil. Receiving those items, Zoram tucked them in the sash of his garish robe. He was stroking his beard and gazing fixedly at the crystal ball when the committee closed the door of the box, locked it, and affixed the seal.

As soon as the committee reached the front row of the audience, the whole stage went pitch-black. House lights dimmed, producing a spooky effect that brought murmurs from the audience. Set deep on the stage, the locked box was completely lost from sight in the solid darkness that the audience faced. The silence was absolute, while the committee members wrote their questions.

Everyone was straining, expecting to hear the raps which would announce that Zoram had gained the answers. Somehow, the swami's confidence had made persons doubt the strength of Norgil's challenge. Even Miriam was disturbed by the thought that Zoram might possess a core of genuine mind reading ability, deep within the inflated fakery that he usually employed.

Men were straining from side seats near the aisle. Hearing them, Miriam glanced in their direction. As they sidled into darkness, she recognized faces that she had seen before. These were the men who had taken Clarry on that one-way ride to the waterfront!

They were sneaking toward the connecting door that led backstage. Miriam hesitated, remembering Norgil's admonition to remain in the audience. But Norgil had not specified that Miriam should ignore an emergency. When the assassins had disappeared into the darkness, the girl followed.

It was black backstage, but Miriam could hear whispers in the darkness; then, sounds that were unmistakable, though they were not loud enough to reach the audience. Miriam, alone of the hundreds in the theater, knew what was happening on the stage.

The same men who had gotten rid of Clarry were taking the sealed box; carrying it, with Zoram inside it, out through the stage door! Whatever Zoram's shortcomings, Miriam could not let him be taken to certain doom. There was only one person who could save the swami from his scheduled fate. That man was Norgil!

Miriam heard the stage door slide gently shut. Reaching it, she pressed the door open wide enough to wedge out through. She could see the big box being loaded on a truck in the rear alley. Only a hundred feet away was the light about the stage entrance to Norgil's theater, shining like a welcoming beacon.

Miriam started toward the light. The clatter of her wooden-soled sandals betrayed her. She heard a harsh voice:

"It's the Jap dame! Grab her—"

There wasn't time to struggle; not even time to shriek. Brawny hands were gripping Miriam, others were stifling her cries. Wilting under the overwhelming attack, the girl was dragged on board the truck, bound for the same destination as Swami Zoram!

CHAPTER V

THE DOUBLE GAME

Business was good at the Club Scimitar, where Rick Althorp, the smiling proprietor, seemed as genial as ever. Chips were rattling merrily at roulette and faro tables, where croupiers and dealers were working in stolid-faced style. But there were glances passed among the personnel that reached Rick Althorp.

No one, Rick included, liked the looks of certain customers who were on hand tonight. There were too many strangers who were difficult to analyze.

Strolling toward his office, Rick gave a signal to one of his assistant managers. The fellow followed him into the little office; gave a darty glance, before closing the door. Rick was behind his desk, when the assistant faced him.

"Well?" queried Rick. "What do you make of it, Markin?"

"They don't belong in town," replied Markin. "They might, if it was carnival time."

"But it isn't," inserted Rick. "Where do you think this bunch has come from?"

"Maybe they're down from Baton Rouge—"

"Or Washington."

Markin's half-hopeful expression became a scared one. Rick remained unperturbed. His laugh was genuine.

"Don't worry," he told Markin. "We aren't shoving the queer tonight. It was a good racket while it lasted, but I was ready to shut up shop, anyway."

Markin nodded. He knew that the Club Scimitar was operating because of a loophole in the law. Neither the city officials of New Orleans, nor the state authorities in Baton Rouge, would be able to close the gambling house for another week.

"With the joint wide open," chuckled Rick, "nobody suspects that I'm keeping something undercover. They forget that the Club Scimitar wasn't always legal; that it might have been a swell place to stow the gambling equipment, in a pinch.

"That's why they don't know the double game. They know I'm giving the customers a good play for their cash, but they haven't guessed that I'm paying out more money than I take in. But not the same money, Markin."

There was a grin from Markin. He understood. Rick's confidence was putting him more at ease.

"One man got wise," added Rick. "I'm going to have a talk with him, Markin. You stay here, while I'm gone."

Rick pulled out the slides above the drawers of the desk. The engaging of well-oiled catches was too slight for ears to hear. Rick tilted the desk forward; the floor came up with it, on hinges, showing a space beneath. Unless the catches were in place, that desk could be rolled about, showing an apparently solid floor beneath.

Descending steep steps, Rick drew the desk down after him. A light guided him from below. Rick stepped into an underground room, where a door marked the route to a secret passage. Men were awaiting him, four of them, but Rick was more interested in the cargo that they had brought.

A large, square box stood between two tables that bore printing presses. The box was locked and sealed. Rick knew that it was soundproof, but he could hear raps coming from it. The raps were produced by a special hammer device, operating between the outside wall of the box and its soundproof lining.The prisoner in the box was tugging the cord that enabled him to signal the outside listeners.

Beyond the box, Rick saw a Japanese girl slumped upon an improvised couch formed by bundles of counterfeit money. The men who had brought the box explained why they had carried the girl along, too. Rick gave an approving nod; then pointed to the box.

"Pry it open."

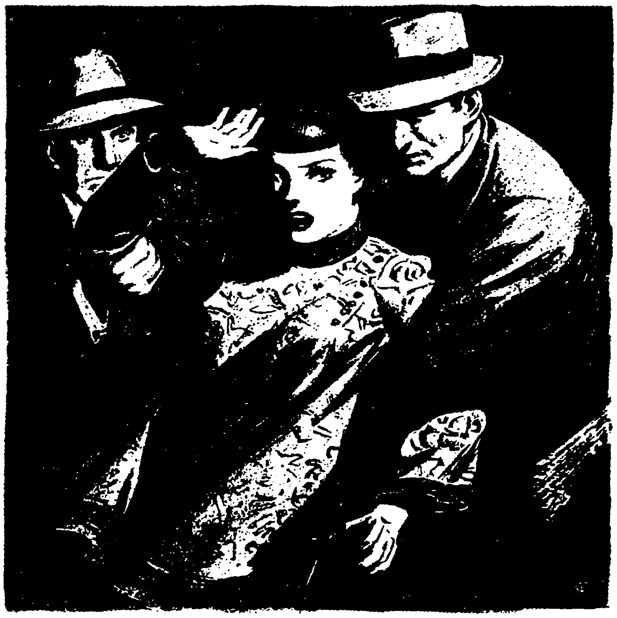
The door of the box gave under the pressure of jimmies. Probing inside, Rick's huskies hauled out the robed figure of Swami Zoram. The bearded faker sank gasping to the floor, his air supply had evidently been getting short.

"You knew a lot, Zoram," spoke Rick, suavely, "so we thought you ought to know some more. Take a look around and see the factory where we turn out the phony mazuma."

Swami Zoram tried to look around. The effort was too much. His eyes rolled feebly; he sank back, huddling pitifully against the box.

"You were lucky, Zoram," declared Rick. "Too lucky. When you made that fool prediction in Border City, we tried to get you, using your own idea, an explosion. But it didn't happen to be your car that ran into the truck we planted.

"You knew you'd be safe when you reached New Orleans. You were too close for us to touch you. Maybe you thought Clarry would be safe, too, because we trusted him enough to let him spy on you. But that stunt of calling the counterfeit bills was a little too strong. We figured that Clarry had tipped you off



There was no chance for Miriam to struggle—even to shriek!

to the racket and we had a way to get rid of him."

From her temporary couch, Miriam saw Zoram try to rise. His beard was wagging as he tried to say something, but his lips were not equal to the task. He sank back, his fingers plucking feebly at the sash of his Hindu costume.

"We couldn't take a risk with you, Zoram," completed Rick, "unless we found a way to pin it on someone else. It was Norgil who gave us the chance we wanted. When they find that you've left the theater, box and all, they'll figure the challenge was the reason.

"Norgil will get the blame first, and he'll slap it back on us. They'll say he got rid of you to save five thousand bucks. He'll say you had yourself removed from the picture for the very same reason. But nobody will be asking me what became of Swami Zoram."

Stooping, Rick grabbed the weary swami by the shoulders, yanked him to his feet, and shoved him back against the box. As Zoram started to sag, Rick caught him in the most convenient method—by the beard. The false whiskers stretched under the strain. Rick's imitation smile became real.

"Phonies!" ejaculated Rick. "We'll take a look at the mug behind them, before we give you and the Jap dame tickets for a ride like Clarry took!"

With a wrench, Rick yanked the beard from Zoram's face. He might have imagined any sort of countenance behind it; any, except the one that he actually viewed. Rick's lips lost their smile completely as he uttered the name that Miriam, at the same moment, was trying to repress.

"Norgil!"

IN the borrowed robes of Zoram, Norgil had become a dynamo of action. He wasn't groggy, as he had pretended; he was very much alive. His hand had whisked from the sash before Rick uttered his name. It brought a revolver with it, and Norgil was shooting as he sprang aside.

Rick and his astonished pals dived for the shelter of tables and presses, some sprawling, as Norgil clipped them with shots to hips and shoulders. Completely tricked by the man who had feigned weakness, along with false identity, they hadn't time to draw their own guns and stop him.

Grabbing Miriam with his free arm, Norgil swept the bewildered girl to the doorway of the passage; put the barrier between them and the opposition just as Rick and an unwounded pal began to open fire. Realizing that Norgil blocked escape by underground, Rick yelled for his toady to stave off a counterthrust. Leaping for the steep stairs, Rick tried to reach his office.

Again, the move was a belated one. Rick hadn't expected battle from Zoram, the shakedown artist who had tried to dicker. In supplying gunfire, Norgil had done more than the opposition. He had sounded a general alarm. Men came piling down the steps to smother Rick Althorp under their arriving weight. They took care of wounded foemen, too, before the crooks could rally enough to prove dangerous.

The arrivals were the strangers who had been around the Club Scimitar. Rick's guess was right: they came from Washington, a squad of Feds who had reached New Orleans while Norgil, otherwise Swami Zoram, had been making the counterfeiters mark time.

When it came to a double game, Norgil had proven himself more than a match for Rick Althorp, the counterfeiter who had used a gaming palace to flood New Orleans with the neatest brand of imitation currency that the Feds had run across in years.

They talked the whole case over, Norgil and Miriam, while they dined on Pompano *en papillotte*, at Gallion's. Miriam found that she couldn't reprove Norgil for keeping her unaware of things. She had to admit that she would have worried too much, had she known the whole truth.

Crooks had actually ended the career of Swami Zoram when the nitro truck blew up. Norgil gained absolute proof of it when he failed to hear from Zoram the next day, regarding Miriam. The chance to play the role of Zoram, by the simple expedient of crossing the courtyard between two dressing rooms in different theaters, had been too good to lose.

The message from Clarry, with the listed bills, had given the first clue to what was going on. Zoram and Clarry had hatched that little stunt to really worry Rick Althorp, and make him come across with the full fifty thousand dollars, rather than have Feds investigate rumors of counterfeit money in New Orleans.

The voice over the phone had tallied with Rick's. Clarry's death was unfortunate; but from it, Miriam had gained a lead that helped Norgil's cause. As Zoram, Norgil had faked the naming of counterfeit bills on the second night, but it had bothered Rick nonetheless. Norgil's own call to Zoram had been a pretense, for Miriam's benefit.

The final bait, Norgil's subtle way of suggesting how Rick could dispose of Zoram, had involved a huge risk. But Norgil had been sure that Rick would choose to gloat over Zoram while the faker was still alive. That hunch had enabled Norgil to discard his part as Zoram, and become himself again, on the timeliest of occasions.

"Sometimes," declared Miriam, when she heard the story out, "I believe you can do anything. Tonight, you certainly proved your ability to be everywhere at once—"

"Not quite," inserted Norgil, with a rueful headshake. "I missed out on the most important job of all. I didn't get back to the theater in time to do the last show."

THE END

In a haunted theater Norgil the magician finds

TOO MANY GHOSTS

by MAXWELL GRANT

CHAPTER I.

THE GHOST WALKS.

The Ghost had finished its sepulchral speech. It was moving from the stage with stately stride, and the audience was glad. Not that it was a real ghost; it was simply an actor playing the part of Hamlet's Father. But this audience did not care for spooks in any form, real or otherwise.

Too many strange things had happened recently, in the Sherbrook Opera House. People claimed the place was haunted, and the audience didn't like to be reminded of it.

From a box seat, Norgil, the magician, watched the first act come to its close. Marcus Pendleton, playing the rôle of Hamlet, was rushing his lines, as though he had the jitters; the other actors were doing the same. From below stage, the Ghost was inserting its repeated admonition: "Swear!" as a reminder that it was still around.

With each repetition of that muffled tone, a quiver buzzed through the audience. Not much of a quiver, for it wasn't much of an audience. There was a sizable sigh, however, when the curtain fell, and lights returned. The audience was really relieved to find a breathing spell.

Norgil turned to Martin Kyne, who sat beside him. Kyne was the owner of the Paragon Theater, where Norgil's show was to open in a few days. He was a broad-faced, beaming fellow, whose smile looked as if it had been painted on his lips; but Norgil could see a reason behind Kyne's present smirk.

Kyne was counting noses; noting that business was very bad at the Opera House. Naturally, as owner of a rival theater, Kyne was pleased.

"A great actor," observed Norgil, glancing at his program. "Too bad he's become a has-been."

"A has-been?" queried Kyne. "You're giving Pendleton too much credit, Norgill. He's a never-was."

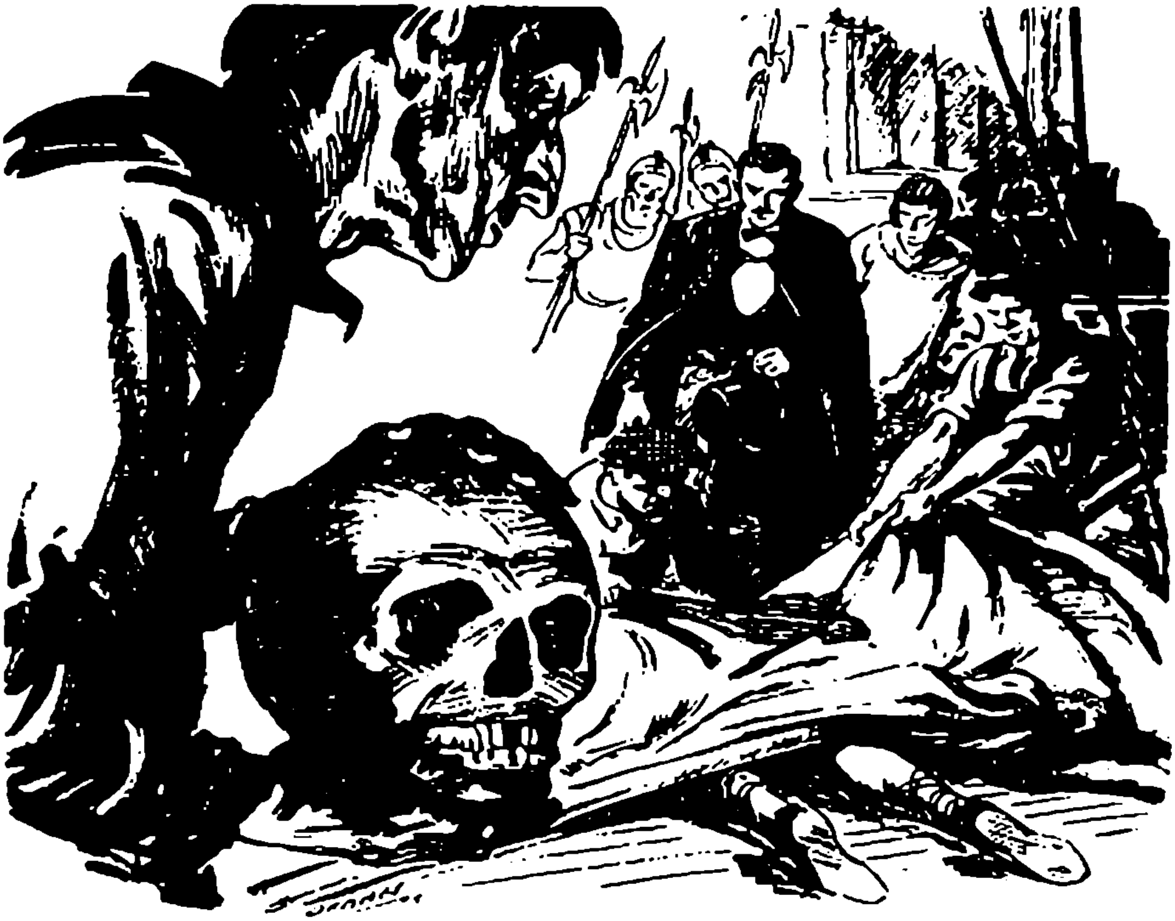
"I don't mean Pendleton." Norgil pointed to the program. "I was speaking of Freeland Dubray, who's playing the Ghost. One of the best character actors the stage ever knew."

Kyne nodded. He let his false smile dwindle, as he muttered regrets that so good an actor as Dubray had gone so far down the ladder. Then, Norgil, having shifted the subject neatly, supplied a suave smile of his own.

"Speaking of ghosts," remarked the magician, "this opera house is supposed to have a real one that shows up right along. I came here to see the ghost. But where is it?"

Kyne showed an expression of reluctance, as though it wasn't his business to know too much about matters in a rival theater. He pondered a few moments; then spoke in a tone indicating that he was repeating mere hearsay.

"It started about three weeks ago," he said, "when the bat flew over the audience."



The great weight flattened Pendleton to the stage.

"A real bat?"

"A big one." Kyne was warming to his subject. "Too big, people said, to be ordinary. Anyway, the rumor got around that it was a vampire bat. It scared away most of the lady customers, so Ray Laddimer, who owns this fire trap, switched to a burlesque policy.

"One week of that was enough. The trouble was with the actors, not the audience. The straight man swore he met up with a living skeleton in his dressing room; the soubrette saw snakes climbing the scenery. So Laddimer went back to repertoire. He booked a revival of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' and—"

The rising curtain interrupted. Impatiently, Norgil watched the second act, which was even more abbreviated than the first. It lacked the restraining influence of Dubray, who did not appear in any scene.

During the next intermission, Kyne told Norgil what had happened to the "Uncle Tom" show. A chunk of fake ice had gone through a trapdoor while Eliza was crossing it. The bloodhounds had been frightened by something offstage, and had refused to play their part. On the last night, there had been a near-panic, when the bat flew again, and a great, luminous beast, the size of a wolf, galloped across the stage.

Wolves, like bats, could be identified with vampires, and Norgil was interested when Kyne stated that some witnesses claimed the foam was ectoplasm, a strange, ethereal substance identified with spirit séances.

The third act was on. Pendleton had lost his nervousness, and was rendering a good portrayal of Hamlet. The Ghost appeared near the end of the act, but its part was silent; hence it lacked the dramatic touch of Dubray's sepulchral voice. Supposedly seen by Hamlet's eyes alone, the ghost drifted from the stage. When the act ended, unmarred by any jarring incidents, there was real applause from the audience.

Pendleton stepped forward to take a bow. He was a conceited chap; from his manner, it would seem that Shapespeare, endowed with vision of the future, had written the part of Hamlet especially for Marcus Pendleton.

His chest swelled, Pendleton took more bows, in a hammy style that Norgil considered comical. Perhaps some of the audience thought the same, and were ribbing him by keeping up the handclaps. But Pendleton seemed oblivious to such a circumstance; he was smiling, bowing, when, in a twinkling, comedy turned to tragedy.

A roaring sound came from high above the actor's head; only Norgil, familiar with the stage, recognized what it could mean. Pendleton didn't hear it; he was centered on the applause. Nor could he see the canvas avalanche, as it plummeted downward, from the proscenium arch. Norgil's shout came too late.

The huge roller of a heavy curtain struck -Pendleton just above the neck, as he was dipping his head for another bow. The great weight flattened him; as the roller struck the stage, with the smash of a falling tree, it brought the canvas with it.

Marcus Pendleton was buried under a painted tent, with a wooden batten tilted across it like a fallen pole. There wasn't a stir from the pile of canvas as the horrified audience watched it. As actors dashed on from the wings, some one had sense enough to lower the asbestos front curtain, cutting off sight of the stage.

Most persons in the audience were wondering how seriously Pendleton had been injured; but not Norgil. He knew the dangers of the theater too well. With Kyne, Norgil had left the box, and was on his way back stage, to offer what testimony he could regarding the sudden death of Marcus Pendleton!

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN BELOW.

Chaos ruled backstage when Norgil arrived there. Other actors were dragging away the fallen curtain to disclose Pendleton's body. They made a bizarre group in their Shakespearian costumes; among them were the two grave-diggers, who were to appear in the churchyard scene.

One was holding the skull of Poor Yorick, which was turned, by chance, toward Pendleton. Dead Yorick was grinning, in infinite jest, at the Hamlet whose days of soliloquy were ended. Yorick still had a skull, but Hamlet hadn't. Pendleton's head had been crushed by the curtain roller.

The stage crew of the opera house were crowding in upon the actors. There were only a few stage hands; because of bad business, the theater was undermanned, as an economy measure. Hoarsely, the stage hands were trying to blame everyone but themselves for the curtain accident.

They pointed to the wrinkled curtain; they claimed it was a "drop" that hadn't been used for months. Years would have been a better term, considering that the scene showed hansom cabs, bicycles, and horse cars, all belonging to the Nineties.

Looking about, Norgil saw a shirt-sleeved man in the offing; a brawny fellow, with grizzled hair, who seemed to have some authority, though he was not using it. Norgil stepped over and introduced himself. The fellow thrust out a hairy paw.

"I'm Bill Gorner," he said. "Watchman, here. I belong on the stage door, only half the time they're chasing me on errands. I was on the door, though, when this mess happened."

"Did anybody go out your way?" inquired Norgil.

"Nobody," Gorner said. Then, his bluff face suddenly worried: "When I say nobody, I ain't allowing for no ghosts."

Evidently, the theory that the opera house was haunted had spread among the hired help, which wasn't surprising, considering the occurrences of the past three weeks. Norgil wasn't prepared to debate the subject with Gorner, a man who had been close to the situation. Mention of ghosts made him think of Hamlet's father. Approaching the members of the cast, Norgil glanced about, then inquired:

"Where is Freeland Dubray?"

The Ghost was missing. His absence did more than excite the actors; it aroused the attention of two policemen, who had just reached the scene of tragedy. Learning that Dubray was a member of the cast, the officers started a hunt for him.

Dubray wasn't on the stage, nor in any of the dressing rooms. One officer found an obscure stairway, leading up to the fly galleries, and hurried in that direction. His companion, not to be outdone, went down another stairs, to investigate the cellar.

Norgil was about to follow when he saw a man with a long, hatchet-jawed face arriving backstage. The newcomer was Ray Laddimer, manager of the opera house. As Norgil had expected, Laddimer promptly pitched into Kyne, blaming the rival theater owner for the trouble.

"This looks like your work, Kyne!" roared Laddimer. "You're getting bolder, aren't you? You couldn't be content with making trouble here; you had to come in person, to see how your schemes were making out."

Laddimer was shoving his hatchet-jaw closer with every sentence. Kyne suddenly decided that the sharp edge wouldn't skin his knuckles. He jabbed his fist at the wagging target, and jolted Laddimer considerably. The cops being absent, Norgil sprang between the fighters, thrusting them apart. Actors and stage hands grabbed them.

Timely in its interruption, a muffled voice sounded from beneath the stairs. It was the cop who had gone down cellar. He had found something, and was shouting for others to come. Accompanied by Gorner, Norgil reached the cellar. Magician and watchman found the officer stooped above an unconscious man who lay amid a pile of boxes.

The victim was Dubray, the actor who played the Ghost. There was no mistaking the high-bridged nose, and strong chin that marked the profile of the former matinee idol. Dubray's face was saggy, heavy-jowled; but its pallor came from loss of blood. His thin hair was clotted;

a streak of crimson ran across his forehead, down by his right ear.

Fortunately, the cut wasn't deep. A box-edge had caused it, when Dubray spilled against the stack. It took only a few minutes to revive the actor; but when Dubray opened his eyes, he winced, and clapped his left hand to his right shoulder. Then, with a heroic effort he tried to rise.

Norgil restrained him. Other faces formed a circle, and Dubray stared at the arrivals. When he spoke, his voice lacked its sepulchral tone; still, it was dramatic.

"You must let me go!" He was viewing the surrounding faces, as if he took them for creatures in a dream. "I *must* go! I have a part to play. I am the Ghost of Hamlet's Father. I must stalk, a silent specter, within the portals of Castle Elsinore!"

They were helping Dubray to his feet. One arm hanging limp, he was pushing with the other, trying to reach the stairway. He pushed Gorner aside, but found his path blocked by Norgil. Gesturing angrily, Dubray paused when Norgil questioned:

"When were you last on the stage, Dubray?"

"In the first act," replied Dubray, slowly, as he stroked his head, gingerly. "I spoke upon the ramparts of the castle; then"—he gave a sweeping, one-armed gesture—"I declared myself from here, within the tomb. After that—"

"After that?"

"Something happened." Shrinking, Dubray stared about, his expression quite bewildered. "It happened here. Something struck me, in the darkness. Something"—his pursed lips tightened—"that could hardly have been human.

"But it couldn't have happened very long ago." Relieved, Dubray gave a smile. "A few minutes, I suppose, more or less. It isn't time for the third act, yet. I can afford to rest awhile."

Seating himself upon an overturned box, Dubray fished in his pocket for a cigarette. Norgil supplied a light; the flame of the light merely accentuated the pallor of the actor's face. Then, as he again rubbed his injured shoulder, Dubray noted that he was in ordinary clothes.

"How odd," he remarked. "What can have happened to my costume? I was wearing my ghostly regalia when I came down here. Look about for it, will you, old chap? It should be here, unless"—his tone was indignant, as he stared at the others present—"unless this is some prank—"

It wasn't any prank. The horror that showed on half a dozen faces told Dubray that no one had a jest in mind; but he could not seem to grasp the reason for the hush that had occurred. Dubray's own statements were the cause.

Mystery stalked hand in hand with tragedy. By Dubray's testimony, he had not been on the stage since the first act. Some other Ghost—perhaps a real one—had been the silent promenader during the fatal third act, which had ended with the death of Marcus Pendleton!

CHAPTER III.

FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY.

When they told Dubray that the third act was over, and that Pendleton had been killed by a falling curtain, he actually laughed. The hoax had gone too far, Dubray declared. He didn't care if he had a dislocated shoulder; all he wanted was his costume, and he would play his part through.

Helped upstairs, Dubray was smiling, ready to forgive the jokers. But when he saw Pendleton's maimed figure and recognized the stage set, Dubray went rigid. His dramatic manner ended as he gasped:

"It's true! All that you told me!"

Searchers found the ghost costume, stuffed on a shelf in the closet of Dubray's dressing room. The bewildered actor could not imagine how it had gotten there. Turned over to a physician, Dubray was taken to his hotel. The other actors formed a huddled, whispering group, wondering what new mystery would confront them.

The cop from the fly gallery returned, bringing a piece of broken rope. It belonged to the curtain that had fallen, and it was badly frayed. Whether it had been hacked with a knife or snapped of its own accord was an open question. The cop had found no other clues in the topmost fly gallery.

Looking up to the height where the gallery formed a thin, weblike bridge of steel, Norgil let his eyes rove to the stairs. The officer had gone up and down without very much noise; another person could have done the same.

"Anyone could have cut that rope," declared Norgil. And then, grimly, he added: "That is, anyone except Pendleton. But we have no proof that the rope was cut. Rather than investigate above, I think that we should look below."

"Just why?" challenged Laddimer. "The curtain came from above, didn't it?"

"We found Dubray below," returned Norgil, "and he ran into somebody down there. Dubray couldn't have dislocated his shoulder by simply pushing over a stack of empty boxes."

Laddimer was inclined to argue further; but a stout man restrained him. Noting the pudgy face of the portly newcomer, Norgil remembered it. Going downstairs with Kyne, he asked who the fat follow was.

Kyne named the man as Andrew Wardlon, a local real-estate promoter. He chuckled over the fact that Wardlon had appeared backstage.

"That's why Laddimer was late getting here," assured Kyne. "He must have been in his office, trying to make a sale to Wardlon. I've had an idea that Kyne is trying to get rid of this old bandbox that he calls an opera house. If he is, he'd better hurry up, or he'll have to give it away."

The officers, by this time, were quite willing to accept any suggestions that Norgil offered, for his manner indicated that he had a plan in mind. His first suggestion was so obvious that everyone had overlooked it; Norgil told them to search the cellar for the "ghost" that had overpowered Dubray.

After about ten minutes, that took care of every open cranny, the officers wound up in front of a locked door that proved to be the property room. Norgil asked who had the keys; Gorner tried a dozen that were on his ring, then shook his head. None of the watchmen's keys seemed to fit.

The prop room, it seemed, was filled with discarded junk that hadn't been used for years—relics from the days when real opera companies had come to the town of Sherbrook. Laddimer made a trip to his office, came back with some old keys, one of which unlocked the door.

Norgil smiled as the officers poked flashlights into the prop room and advanced with drawn guns. It had taken Laddimer quite a while to find the keys, and Norgil could have ended the tense wait, minutes ago. The door was of wood, quite stoutly built; but its hinges were of a simple pin type, easily removable. However, it had been better to wait, and open the door in the conventional manner.

The musty room was filled with trunks and crates. Finding a light switch, Gorner pressed it. The officers put away their flashlights, and the watchman helped them search the room. They pried among crates, and opened some of the larger chests and trunks. But they found nothing except odds and ends of theatrical equipment, mostly wrapped in newspapers, and old pieces of frayed velvet curtains.

The hunt ended, Gorner turned out the light. He pulled a hook that held the door open, so that it could swing shut on its spring. The door had an automatic lock; Gorner tested the knob to make sure that it was tightly shut. After that, the disappointed ghost hunters went up to the stage.

Pendleton's death was a case for the coroner, and the consensus was that it would be declared an accident. So many odd things had happened around the jinxed opera house that the chance fall of the wrong curtain would have been trivial, if someone had not happened to be under it.

The stage hands remained after others had gone to catalogue the spooky occurrences of the past three weeks. But there was not a thing, they admitted, that could have been more tangible than chance, coupled with imagination. They believed that the opera house was haunted, but in the same breath they argued that no one could arrest a ghost.

Slipping away from Kyne, who was drinking in the details that the stage hands gave, Norgil went through the empty theater and reached Laddimer's office. Outside the door, he could not help but catch a conversation within. Laddimer was talking to Wardlon; and Kyne was correct about the real-estate deal.

"Thirty thousand is an attractive offer," Laddimer was saying. "To be frank, Wardlon, it's a trifle better than our own appraisal of the property. How long can you keep it open?"

"Until the end of your season," replied Wardlon. "The spring would be a good time for the wreckers to demolish the building. So go right ahead with your schedule."

"After tonight?" queried Laddimer. "It's likely to be impossible. You haven't an idea, Wardlon, how a hoodoo can hurt a theater. There isn't a show in the country that would play this opera house."

It was just the moment for Norgil to knock. His was the knock of opportunity, but from the startled noises that came to his ears, it seemed that Laddimer and Wardlon took him to be the missing ghost, calling in person.

There was a clatter as Laddimer yanked the door wide. The hatchet-jawed man looked scared, as did pudgy-faced Wardlon, who had retreated to a far corner of the office. Norgil gave them both a suave smile.

"I'm not the ghost," he told Laddimer, "but I've come to talk about him. I'd like to end that jinx, Laddimer."

"But how?" queried Laddimer.

"By bringing my show in here tomorrow," replied Norgil promptly.

"You know, Laddimer"—the coming thought made the magician chuckle—"I've been making a feature of my spook show, with fake ghosts hovering all over the stage. It would be quite a novelty to have a real one in the act."

"But you're to open at the Paragon on Friday—"

"And this," interposed Norgil, "is only Wednesday. I propose to settle the ghost question, during a very limited engagement. You can book my show on the briefest of terms. For one night only!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEATH THAT MISSED.

Never before had the natives of Sherbrook awakened to such a sensation as the one that greeted them in the morning. Along with the front-page story of the Pendleton tragedy, the newspapers carried big headlines stating that Norgil, the magician, intended to challenge the killer ghost.

Big placards, fresh from pounding presses, glared from store windows and telegraph poles. Boys were patrolling the streets, stuffing handbills into doors, and giving them to passers-by. All this was Laddimer's work, but the owner of the opera house had simply followed a suggestion made by Norgil:

Magician Challenges Ghost!

The thing was news, of a very big sort. Evidently Norgil did not agree with the coroner's verdict that Pendleton's death had come through misadventure. But Norgil wasn't locking horns with the law; for everybody agreed that the acts of ghosts were outside the jurisdiction of the county authorities.

At nine o'clock the sale of tickets began. The opera house was sold out by noon. The place was no longer under taboo by the public at large. Norgil's boldness marked him as a ghost tamer, and even the most superstitious persons were willing to be part of an audience when the magician appeared upon the stage.

Should the ghost have a grudge toward any one, it would be Norgil; in fact, the handbills stated as much. But Norgil was prepared to take the risk.

All the rumors of the past three weeks sprang to life. The ghost was blamed for many things prior to its attack on Dubray and its murder of Pendleton. Norgil was not criticized for capitalizing on the situation; he had spiked that possibility.

Every cent of the night's proceeds, the handbills proclaimed, would go to the benefit of the Shakespearian troupe, which was stranded because of Pendleton's death and the injuries to Dubray, the only other member of the cast who knew the rôle of Hamlet.

The one objector was Martin Kyne. The owner of the Paragon Theater wanted Norgil to stay out of the rival opera house; he expressed his reasons vociferously, late that afternoon.

"I won't allow it!" stormed Kyne. "You're under contract, Norgil, to play *my* theater; not Laddimer's."

"Beginning tomorrow," demanded Norgil. "Nothing in the contract prevents me from appearing elsewhere in Sherbrook. I won't be doing my regular magic act; just a special spook show."

"But this will lift the hoodoo from the opera house. It will pull Laddimer out of the red—"

Kyne caught himself at Norgil's suave chuckle. The broad-faced man regained his painted smile, but it looked sickly. Kyne saw the inference; that he had taken part in the ghost business. Earnestly, he disavowed any connection with things mysterious at the opera house.

"Go right ahead, Norgil," insisted Kyne. "Help Laddimer; he really needs it. You'll get plenty of publicity, and I'll make extra profit when you pack the Paragon next week."

After an early dinner, Norgil went to the opera house, accompanied by his leading lady, Miriam Laymond. The doors hadn't opened, so they went in by the stage entrance, where they found Gorner expecting them. Though his face showed relief, the grizzled watchman betrayed anxiety in his tone.

"Being all alone here," Gorner declared, "I can't watch everywhere. Anybody could come backstage through the house. After I finished my inspection, I heard noises."

"From the stage?" inquired Norgil.

"I don't know," admitted Gorner. "The sounds were too creepy to locate. I figured I'd better stay here until you showed up. But it's gone quiet, lately."

"We'll have a look around."

By the dim light of the stage, Norgil guided Miriam to a dressing room and turned on the light. They were on the far side of the stage; Norgil told the girl to listen for anything unusual. Coming back across the stage, Norgil took the stairway to the cellar.

He wanted to have a look inside the property room. The police had searched it, and found no one hiding, but Norgil could foresee other discoveries. He was thinking of vampire bats, werewolves and snakes. Every old opera house had mechanical contrivances and costumes, used in such stage effects. If anywhere, the items should be in the old prop room.

A light greeted Norgil. The door of the prop room was wide, held open by its hook. Not entirely surprised, Norgil examined the lock; found it intact. He tested the pin hinges, by reaching in back of the door. They were loose; easily removable. There was no way to tell how the door had been opened.

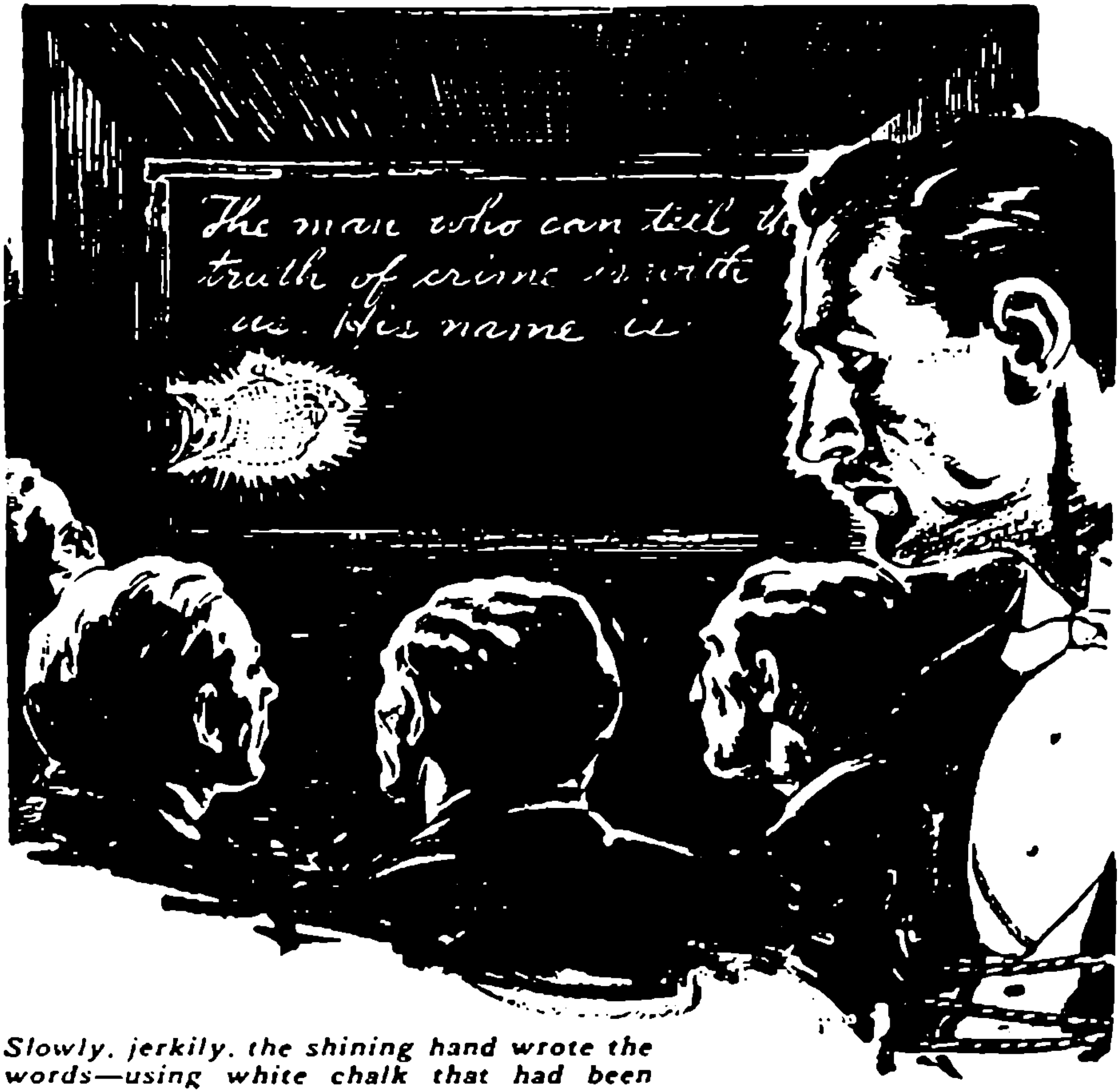
His hands dipped in his pockets, Norgil entered the lighted prop room. The place was topsy-turvy. Crates had been ripped open, the contents scattered. Trunk lids were lifted; the interiors half emptied. A pile of frayed curtains attracted Norgil to a deep corner. As he stopped there, he heard a creaky sound behind him.

Wheeling, Norgil saw the door swinging shut, wavering on its hinges. Some one had lifted the hook that held it open; whether the hand was human or ghostly, Norgil could not tell, for the cellar beyond was dark. He sprang for the shutting door, but it stopped with a jarring slam before he could reach it.

There was a *click* from the automatic lock, leaving no way for Norgil to unlock it, even with a key; for the inside of the door had no keyhole.

Whatever the cause that had imprisoned Norgil below stage, its manifestations were slight compared with those that suddenly alarmed Miriam, in the dressing room.

Her door was open; and outside it, Miriam heard the clump of heavy footsteps that began with startling suddenness. The thing seemed incredible, considering that there was no one on this side of the stage. Staring for sight of a human form, Miriam saw none, though the ponderous paces continued.


The man who can tell th
truth of crime is with
us. His name is

Slowly, jerkily, the shining hand wrote the words—using white chalk that had been treated with luminous paint.

They had passed the wing, those strides of an invisible marcher, and were continuing across the stage. They had marched halfway, when the girl found her voice, and uttered a resounding scream. Then, relieved by her own shriek, Miriam dashed in pursuit of the footsteps.

She picked the wrong side of a curtain that was lowered across the center of the stage. The pacing was in back of the curtain; valiantly, Miriam sought to overtake the ghost before it reached the other wing. Almost at her goal, she heard the footsteps halt; pouncing past the wing, she drove straight into the clutch of a figure that shot forward.

A man's strong arms suppressed Miriam's struggles; a hand pressed over her lips, to stop her screams. Staring wild-eyed at the face above her, Miriam managed a stifled gasp. Her captor was Norgil!

The magician had escaped from the closed prop room with rapid ease. In examining the open door, he had removed the loose pins from the hinges, and dropped them in his pocket. The hinges had remained in place, firmly enough for the door to swing when the "ghost" released the hook. But Norgil had driven the door loose with his shoulder, and had begun a search for the spook below, when he heard Miriam's shriek.

Hearing Miriam's description of the footsteps, Norgil studied the stage. His keen eyes detected a ruddy glimmer along a line of nailheads, in the floor. That nail was copper; tracing the course of the footsteps, Norgil saw an old costume, lying beneath a low table. From the strew, he drew a pair of high boots; tested their weight, and nodded.

"The old comedy stunt," recalled Norgil. "So old, I guess they think I've forgotten it. These boots are loaded with iron filings in the soles. Somebody operated a rolling electromagnet under the stage, to make them walk across."

Miriam recalled that it was dark outside the dressing room; that the boots could have laid there unnoticed. She realized that Norgil had been imprisoned in the prop room, so that the ghost could find time to make the boots strut. Norgil's prompt escape meant that the mischief-maker was still down cellar.

Intent upon trapping the prowler, Norgil started toward the stairs, taking Miriam along. They had to pass a corner where a small brass stand was placed against the wall. Before they could make the turn, they were blinded by a tremendous flash; as vivid as a streak of lightning.

Miriam clapped her hands across her eyes; raising one arm, Norgil encircled the girl with the other. He wheeled her away from the menacing spot, across the open stage, toward the far wing. As they went, Miriam heard a roaring sound that did not strike her as peculiar, considering the lightning flash.

It was the burst of thunder, coming from high above, breaking, clattering into a tremendous peal. It was Norgil, not Miriam, who seemed to take fright at the roar from overhead. Swinging toward the footlights, Norgil dragged Miriam along, not stopping until they stumbled into the trough.

The thunder had become a crash; its smashes were no longer high, but on the level of the stage. There was splintering sounds, as Miriam opened her eyes. Like Norgil, she was blinking, but both saw the danger that they had escaped.

A shower was striking the stage; not a spatter of rain, or hail, but a deluge of cannon balls that cracked the planking as they struck! Death had missed a pair of victims only through the quick thinking of Norgil, the magician!

CHAPTER V.

THE GHOSTLY HAND.

By the time Norgil and Miriam had reached their feet, another person had joined them. The arrival was Gorner, in from the stage door. Lightning and thunder had brought him, and he was furnishing a partial explanation of the man-made storm.

The brass stand by the stairs was a lightning machine, loaded with magnesium powder. The cannon balls belonged with the thunder apparatus, located in the fly galleries, on the far side of the stage. The metal balls were supposed to roll through a trough from the top gallery to the one below; but usually, they stopped there.

"They're used in 'Rip Van Winkle,' of course," explained Gorner, "and the stage crew figured they might be needed for the 'Hamlet' show. That's why they were set up, and ready; but I can't figure how they happened to go off."

Norgil examined the brass stand. It had a lever, which could have been tugged from the side toward the stairway. Crossing the stage, the magician looked up to the thunder trough. Turning his gaze downward, Norgil saw a coil of rope.

"Somebody yanked it clear out," declared Gorner, in a troubled tone. "That's why those cannon balls rode right through. But what gets me"—his lips had a nervous twitch—"is how both things could have happened. It would take a ghost to hop from one side of the stage to the other"—he snapped his fingers—"just like that."

"He may have started from the other side," decided Norgil, "but he wound up here. Haul up that curtain, Gorner, and let's have a look at the full stage."

Gorner hauled the curtain. Norgil kept peering about to make sure that no one, not even a ghost, could manage to sneak to the stage door or out through the house. Along the back wall were stacks of scenery; as he approached them, Norgil looked for a spot where Miriam could stay away from trouble.

There was a broad board, about the size of a door, propped against the wall. Satisfied that no one could be lurking in such a narrow space, Norgil told Miriam to take her stand near the board, and look around. Norgil was calling to Gorner for more lights, when Miriam interrupted:

"Over there!"

Turning to see which way Miriam had pointed, Norgil witnessed a most startling scene. Miriam's back was against the broad board; her arm gave an upward fling, as a knife blade flashed beneath her elbow, burying itself in the board, almost to the hilt.

Another knife drove in from nowhere, its blade quivering against the girl's smooth neck. Twisting, Miriam shrieked, as a third knife flashed beside her knee. More blades were coming, as Norgil sprang to aid her; flat against the board, Miriam stared with eyes that seemed hypnotized, as the dirks sprang to life about her.

Her arms, her legs, her neck were literally girded with the weapons, yet none had scored a hit. As a knife-thrower, the ghost was superb, but there was no way to guess when he would quit the byplay, and get down to murderous business.

Fearing that Miriam might be pinned by a blade, Norgil would not have seized her, if the girl hadn't staggered forward of her own accord. She was pointing at an angle as Norgil grabbed her; for the first time she actually saw a blade come whizzing through the air. Norgil hadn't waited for the pointing gesture. In gripping Miriam, he rolled her to the floor.

The arriving knife skimmed Norgil's descending neck by a mere half-inch, and went hilt-deep into the board, striking the spot where Miriam's fast-beating heart had been located only a few moments before!

Gorner had seen the direction of Miriam's pointing finger, just before the knives distracted her attention. The watchman dashed across the stage, swinging a billy that he hauled from his pocket. But Gorner overtook neither ghost nor human prey; his trip was too long and roundabout. He came to a stop at a sliding metal door, a fireproof barrier that separated the stage from the main portion of the theater.

The door was closed; if the fugitive had gone that way, he could easily have reached a side exit in the darkened house. Gorner came back dejectedly to stare at the knives that bristled from the board. He reached for the central dirk; tugged it loose, before Norgil saw what he was doing.

"You should have waited, Gorner," objected Norgil. "If there were fingerprints on that knife handle, they might have helped us track down a murderer."

"There's still a lot of other knives—"

"They won't do." Norgil was at the board; reaching beneath it, he discovered a secret catch. "Watch what happens."

At pressure of the catch, the knives swung upward on their buried points. The trick board spread its double-ply; slots opened, to receive the knives. Once they were out of sight within the thick board, the slots closed.

"The ghost guessed wrong again," declared Norgil. "He brought this board up from the prop room, earlier, hoping somebody would bump against it, and think that knives were coming from nowhere. It fooled me during the excitement; but not afterward.

"It's an old stunt, used by pretended knife throwers. So old, that the ghost thought I'd never heard of it, like the walking boots. The knife throwers used to fake their tosses, and the popping knifes made it look real. Our friend the ghost stepped up the mechanism in this board; when Miriam pressed it accidentally, the knives came fast. The only real knife was the last one; it was intended for my back, when I grabbed Miriam."

As with the thundering cannon balls, death had been the intended sequel in the knife stunt. But the menace of the ghost was ended, for a while. People were arriving backstage; members of Norgil's company as well as stage hands. The theater doors had opened; the crowds were beginning to enter.

Norgil was in his dressing room when Gorner came with a visitor, Freeland Dubray. The man who had played the Ghost in "Hamlet" lacked his pallor of the night before; but his right shoulder was heavily bandaged, and his arm was in a sling. Patches of adhesive tape covered the gash above his ear.

Dubray was earnestly thanking Norgil for his coming contribution to the stranded troupe when he saw the magician pick up a rubber glove that was absorbing the rays of a strong electric light. When Norgil tested the glove in a darkened corner, it gave off a luminous glow.

"The spirit hand," Norgil chuckled. Then, turning to Gorner, in the doorway: "Don't believe the stage crew, if they claim real spooks are around again. When I'm in black"—he pointed to a catlike costume in the corner of the room—"with this glove on my fist, the audience will take the thing for the hand of a ghost."

It was evident that Norgil considered recent trickery as proof that no real ghost would appear. He was still working with the luminous glove, after Dubray and Gorner left; obligingly, Norgil showed his spirit hand to the next visitors.

They were Laddimer and Kyne; the owners of the rival theaters had declared a truce for the evening, since both stood to profit by Norgil's coming séance. With Laddimer was Wardlon, and the pudgy real-estate man seemed worried because he had been brought behind scenes to the haunted stage. Norgil noted his nervousness.

"I don't blame you," Norgil told Wardlon. "The people in the audience will feel safe only as long as they're on their own side of the footlights. But I've got to have a committee on the stage, when I give my challenge to the ghost.

"I'd like to come up, Wardlon, to start the rest. You two can come also"—Norgil was speaking casually to Laddimer and Kyne—just to promote some confidence. You'll help out, too, if they get scared when I use the glove. Keep them calmed. I'll appreciate it."

The fact that the ghost was to be a fake one satisfied the listeners. Before leaving, they agreed to Norgil's plan. Alone, the magician tested the glow again, and smiled as he noted its shade of ghostly green.

A ghostly hand would appear tonight; of that, Norgil was quite certain. But the magician's scheme went deeper than the matter of the luminous glove. Thinking in terms of the haunted theater and the death that had struck upon its stage, Norgil was counting upon the appearance of a hand other than his own!

CHAPTER VI.

THE FINGERS WRITE.

Norgil stood upon the lighted stage, in front of a black velvet alcove that his assistants had arranged. Placed in the alcove was a large blackboard, on an easel. It was a device that Norgil had invented, but never used; intended for a usual spook act, the blackboard was perfect for the magician's present show.

Chairs flanked the alcove; a dozen on each side. The chairs were occupied, by daring members of the audience who had played follow the leader when Wardlon, Laddimer, and Kyne had come up the steps to the stage.

They were an assorted lot, those daredevils. A few were brawny fellows, built like truck drivers, who managed to exchange half-hearted grins. Others were debonair youths who had lost much of their nerve. They looked as though they had come on the stage because their girls had dared them.

Those on one side had let Wardlon take the post of honor nearest the alcove. Those on the other had grabbed the other chairs, forcing an old gentleman into the nearest one. Wardlon, his fat face dubious, was staring stiffly at the old man, who sat with his chin in one hand, peering dully through his pince-nez glasses. At times he tilted his head, with its shock of gray hair, and studied the blackboard wonderingly.

Norgil called for a pair of ropes; then asked the committee to tie him to a post, away from the alcove. He rejected Wardlon, who was too stout for so much effort, and also waved back the old man whose long, shaky hands were not the sort that could tie strong knots.

Bound to the post, Norgil turned his face toward the audience, and announced:

"When the ghost appears, you can be sure that it is not myself. I shall call upon the ghost, requesting it to write a message on the boards. The words that the ghostly hand inscribes will reveal the truth of all strange events that have happened on this stage."

Norgil's tone was confident. It

brought an excited buzz throughout the audience. Norgil looked toward the wing near the stage entrance. Gorner had taken over the switchboard; the watchman was nodding, to assure Norgil that the lights would go off and on, exactly as called for.

Norgil ordered lights off.

Blackness blotted the stage. Committee and audience sat tense, wondering what was happening in the gloom. None doubted that Norgil could shake off the ropes, should he choose. The magician had a reputation as an escape artist; such work, to him, was child's play.

Then, as though a hidden force had ripped the darkness, a luminous hand appeared, at a spot which could only be the upper left corner of the unseen blackboard!

The wisdom of Norgil's admonition to his own committeemen was proven. Chairs shuffled on the stage, their occupants anxious to make a dash back for the steps. Calm whispers restrained them; prevented panic.

Slowly, jerkily, the shining hand began to write. It was using white chalk that had been treated with luminous paint, for the inscribed words glowed, like the hand itself. The letters were large, distinguishable at a distance:

The man who can tell the truth of crime is with us. His name is—

The hand had finished two lines, flitting across the board, between them. It was moving leftward again, to commence the third line, which would start with the promised name, when the blackboard gave an upward jolt.

There was a shout from Norgil; with it, the flame of a revolver split the darkness. People heard the thwack of a club, striking against woodwork. Instantly lights appeared; in the burn from the borders and the footlight troughs, a strange fray was revealed.

Two men were struggling in front of the blackboard, which was turned askew. One had a revolver; the other a club. The man with the gun was the old gentleman from the committee; his antagonist was Gorner, the watchman!

Norgil wasn't in the fight. He was clear of the ropes, and at the right side of the blackbard. At the left of the board was the hand; a carved thing of wood, mounted on the board itself. Attached to the hand was a roller cloth; like two that Norgil had already rolled, from his side of the blackboard, to disclose written lines previously inscribed on the surface of the board itself.

The blackboard bore a bullet hole; there was a big dent, where a club had struck. Both men had been after Norgil when they encountered each other in the dark. Each thought he had therewith grabbed the magician.

One man was instantly recognized. He was Gorner, the watchman, swinging his heavy billy. The club grazed the other fighter's head, as it ducked aside; the old man's wig was carried away, as his glasses tilted from his nose. His identity, too, was disclosed. The old man who had cast his years aside was Freeland Dubray!

Committeemen were smothering the fighters. They sprawled Gorner, and yanked his club away. Hands clutched Dubray's gun, thrusting its muzzle toward the owner. Before Norgil could get the weapon from the actor, Dubray pulled the trigger.

Whether by chance or design, the shot found Dubray's chest. Dragged to a chair. Dubray realized that he had received his death wound. He elevated his chin toward Norgil; his glazing eyes steadied for the moment.

"You win," panted Dubray. "I killed Pendleton. He was"—the man's lips twisted, as he coughed; perhaps their contortion was a grin—"he was a lousy Hamlet."

Gorner, bewildered, was staring at Norgil; his eyes turned toward Miriam, who was coming from the switchboard, which she had taken, when the watchman sneaked from it. Like Dubray, Gorner knew that his part of the game was known; he nodded weakly as Norgil voiced accusations.

"You were the ghost for three weeks, Gorner," disclosed Norgil. "It had to be some one backstage. As the watchman, you were the only one who could cover his own tracks. Your game was never murder; you were simply paid to jinx the opera house.

"These keys of yours"—Norgil jingled a bunch that had fallen from Gorner's pocket—"include one to the prop room. I saw you fumble it last night. That's where you got the old contraptions to work your second-rate ghost stunts."

Gorner started to say something; then hesitated. Norgil spoke it for him.

"Dubray spotted you in the prop room last night," declared the magician, "when he went down to speak from the tomb. He pulled the hook and locked you in: that's why the ghost didn't do any of its usual tricks.

"After he'd finished with his part in the third act, Dubray saw a chance at murder, that he could blame on you. He stowed his costume in his dressing room and sneaked to the fly gallery. He cut the rope, so a curtain would fall squarely on Pendleton. Dubray hated the fellow who had crowded him out of the Hamlet part."

Norgil was ready to reconstruct the whole case further; but Gorner felt that he could help himself by admitting something on his own.

"That's why Dubray let me out!" he blurted. "He wanted me to be the goat. I was fool enough to put the slug on him—"

"And Dubray was smart enough," interposed Norgil, "to make it worse for you, by pretending that he'd been knocked out long before the murder."

Gorner nodded, somewhat blankly. "You thought the curtain fell by

I MAKE SURE YOU GET A BIG, BIG BOTTLE
Pepsi-Cola
REFRESHING HEALTHFUL
5¢
I MAKE SURE THE FLAVOR HITS THE SPOT

accident," said Norgil. "Dubray fooled you completely. When I arranged to appear here tonight, you felt you had to pull some ghost stuff. You dug up the boots, and the knife board.

"The lightning flash was smart, Gorner. You sprang it, so I wouldn't catch you coming from the cellar. But Dubray was smarter. He'd sneaked in the house and was across the stage. He supplied the thunder and let it go the limit. Already a murderer, he was ready to kill again.

"He chucked the real knife later; the only one he had. It had you baffled, Gorner. You fell for Dubray's pretense that his wrenched shoulder was a dislocation. You see"—Norgil turned to the listeners—"there were *two* ghosts in the game; and two happened to be too many, when I introduced a third."

Norgil's stunt of showing a luminous glove to Dubray and Gorner, then substituting a mechanical hand, was the crux of the whole revelation. Separately, Dubray and Gorner had pounced for Norgil, neither expecting to meet the other, instead.

There was just one more question. Ray Laddimer produced it. Angrily, the owner of the opera house shouted:

"Somebody bribed you to start that jinx, Gorner! You don't have to tell me who it was. I know!"

With a leap, Laddimer reached his old antagonist, Martin Kyne. The manager of the Paragon Theater met the attack. This time, Norgil did not come between them. Instead, he clapped a hand upon the shoulder of a portly man, who was half from his chair, wondering which way to go.

"A better candidate," volunteered Norgil. "Andrew Waldron."

Forgetting their feud, the rival theater man grabbed the real-estate promoter. Waldron blubbered the truth, knowing that Gorner would expose him anyway. He'd wanted to make Laddimer sell the opera house before the word got around that the site was wanted by a big utility company for its office building. Waldron had planned to sell at triple the price he offered Laddimer.

When the crowd had gone, and Norgil was packing his equipment, the magician turned to Miriam with a smile. Whimsically, Norgil summed the story of his successful séance, with the words:

"Too many ghosts!"

"THE RED POOL," a complete novel by Norvell Page, will feature the June issue of MYSTERY, on sale during May. In addition, there will be another Jim Strong novelette by Frank Gruber; a Red Drake yarn, "I Stole a Horse," by W. T. Ballard, and other stories by Mark Harper, Blassingame, and so on. Remember—every issue of Street & Smith's MYSTERY Magazine is packed with unusual stories—the biggest buy you can get for only TEN CENTS!

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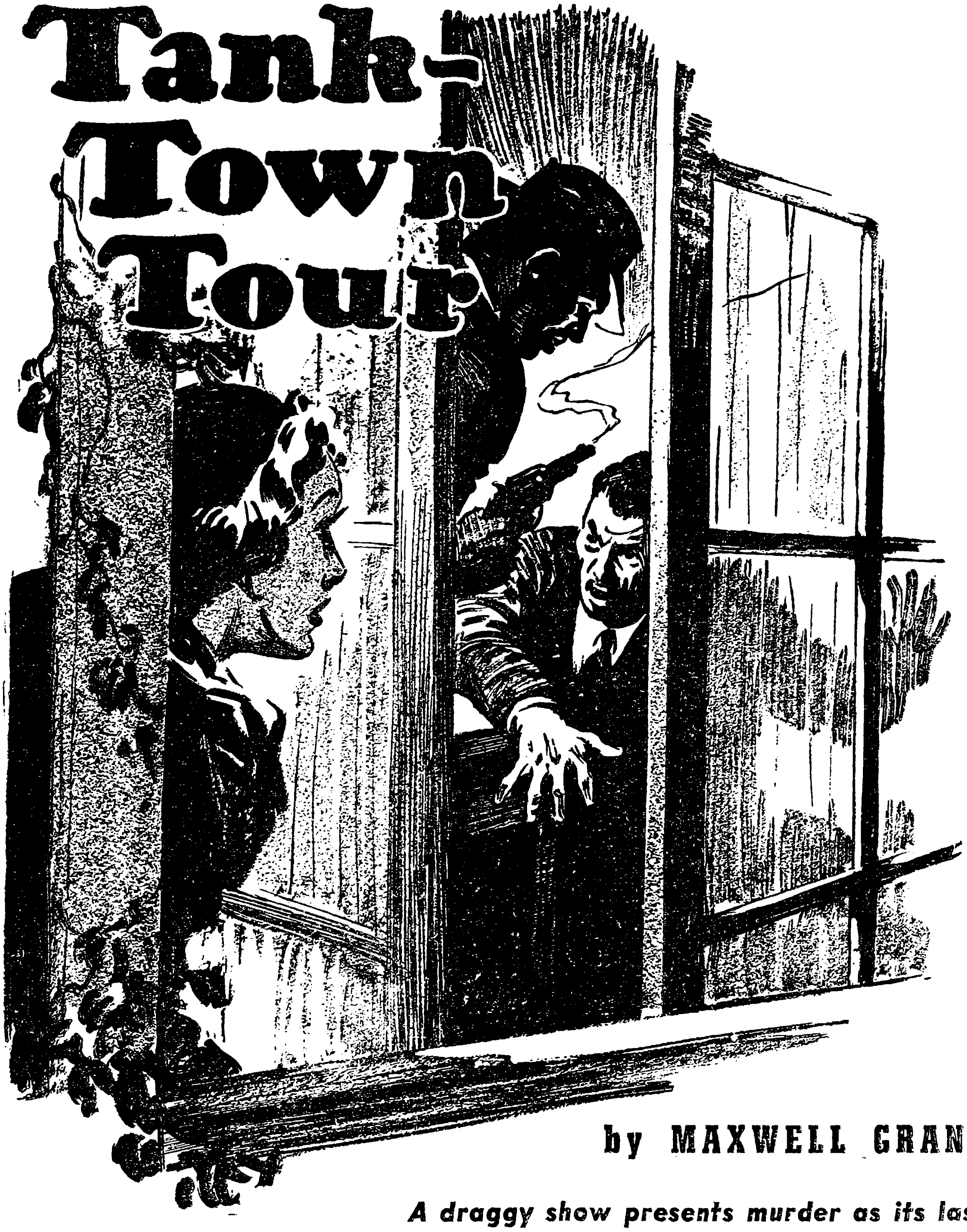


by MAXWELL GRANT

A draggy show presents murder as its last act—and Norgil the magician is starred!

CHAPTER I.

VAUDEVILLE COMES BACK.

They were bringing back vaudeville in Grand Falls; bringing it back in a fashion that threatened to kill and bury it. The show was getting plenty of laughs, but the merriment came before the actors sprang their gags, not after.

Perhaps Heloise was to blame. She opened the show, assisted by Professor Engler, and proved herself capable at nothing except eating fish. All trained seals should do their stunts and accept a fish as a reward;

Heloise happened to be the exception.

Her appetite was ravenous, and the more she ate, the less she cared about the act. Heloise flunked everything except the ball-balancing stunt at the finish. By then, the audience was as fed up as Heloise. When Profesesor Engler finally had the thirty-inch sphere spinning on the end of the trained seal's upturned nose, the audience responded with raspberries instead of applause.

No doubt Professor Engler took himself too seriously, which added to his misfortune. The other turns made the mistake of trying to be funny. The comedy song-and-dance team, the wisecracking monologist, even the contortionist who disported in a monkey suit—all went flat, because they followed Heloise.

It took the feature act to save the bill. The boos that greeted Norgil, the magician turned to silence as his nimble fingers plucked cigarettes from nowhere, vanished them with mere rubs of his hands and found them again in puffs of smoke that he blew from his lips.

Scattered applause arrived, along with bowls of goldfish, huge bouquets of flowers, and a flaming fire bowl that the magician produced from flimsy clothes of silk. When a brimming glass of water traveled up through the crown of an inverted opera hat and Norgil passed both items for inspection, the magician had won his audience.

Then came the illusion that should have been the climax. Introducing his leading lady, Miriam Laymond, Norgil loaded her into a gigantic cannon. Aimed at a square box hanging from the theater dome, the cannon was fired with a huge blast. Hauling the box down by a rope, Norgil and his assistant, Fritz, brought other boxes from within it. Out of the third, and innermost, box of the nest popped Miriam, to take a bow with Norgil, while the handclaps of the audience rocked the rafters. Right then the audience had forgotten everything that went before; but they were due for a reminder.

This was a unit show. The entire cast flooded the stage, as a finale. Dancers, monologist, contortionist, arrived without a mishap. But when Heloise flip-flapped on the stage, tripping her stooge, Professor Engler, the entire spell was shattered. The curtain thudded to the stage as though glad to be released, while the *yahhhs* and catcalls from the audience would have excited envy in the Bronx.

From the rear of the audience, two men in Tuxedos viewed the debacle. One was the theater manager, Ray Comber, a dapper man of lightweight build. His face showed worry as he glanced at his companion, a chunky man, whose eyes stared from under bushy brows, and whose heavy jaw was propped in his hands as he leaned on the rail behind the rear row.

The chunky man was Luke Trevan, former owner of several big-city night clubs. For several months, Trevan had been in the vicinity of Grand Falls, organizing a new theater chain. Anxious to add the Plaza Theater to Trevan's circuit, Comber had hoped that the vaudeville show would please the chunky organizer. Apparently, it hadn't.

Trevan's response was a blunt, harsh query:

"How long has this been going on?"

"For two days," replied Comber. "I'll admit it's a cheap show, Mr. Trevan, but it's packing the house, and they seem to like it."

"I don't," returned Trevan. "I thought I'd learned one thing from the night-club business: that vaudeville was on the way back. But a few corny shows like this will put it on the way out."

"Norgil has a good act—"

"Sure. Good enough to make the rest of the bill look even worse than it is. I'd like to know"—Trevan furrowed his busy brows—"why a real performer like Norgil wants to louse around with such a punk unit. Take me backstage, Comber. I want to meet Norgil."

Norgil wasn't in his dressing room when Trevan and Comber arrived there. The visitors learned that the magician was in with Professeor Engler, trying to solve the unit's major problem—that of improving the trained-seal act. From the comments backstage, both the professor and Heloise had made themselves thoroughly unpopular with the rest of the cast.

The monologist was suggesting that Heloise might do better if fed a different brand of fish. The contortionist opined that if Professor Engler let down his handle-bar mustache, he could double as a walrus and do the stunts that Heloise flunked. But behind such levity was a serious note. The members of the unit saw disaster to their tour unless the Heloise menace could be permanently removed.

When Norgil came from the professor's dressing room, he brought good news. He had told Engler that the show was running too long and that Heloise could work in Norgil's act, instead of doing an individual turn. Norgil intended to produce the seal from a tip-over box for the finale, and the professor would then step on the stage with the big ball, so that Heloise could perform her one sure stunt, the nose balance.

Seeing Comber, Norgil asked the theater manager's approval and received it. Therewith, Comber introduced Norgil to Trevan. The magician had heard of the night-club owner; they shook hands heartily. When Norgil stepped toward his dressing room, Trevan followed. When the rest were out of earshot, Trevan queried:

"What's the lowdown, Norgil? Why did you get booked with this horse opera? Why don't you play the big time?"

Smiling, Norgil stepped past his dressing room, to unlock another door. Trevan noted that the magician's smile was bitter.

"The big time?" Norgil repeated. "Do you know where I can find any, Trevan?"

"There's not much of it left," conceded Trevan, "but you could make spots for yourself, if you had a big act—"

He stopped, as Norgil opened the door. Within was a dressing room stacked to the ceiling with tables, cabinets, and other magical equipment, mostly in an unfinished state. Norgil wheeled out a small, boxlike cabinet which was mounted on a square platform. It was the only piece of apparatus that was painted, but Trevan noted that it needed another coat.

"This will do for Heloise," decided Norgil. "I'll have Fritz touch it up, and after that we can get back to work."

A great light dawned on Trevan.

"You mean you're building a new shop?" he queried. "While you're on the road with the unit?"

"Exactly," replied Norgil, "and the horse opera is covering my expenses. Maybe I'll be ready for your new circuit when it opens, Trevan."

"You won't have long to wait," declared Trevan. "Take a look at next week's *Variety,* when it goes on sale tomorrow. They're giving me a big write-up in the sheet."

As they left the theater together, Comber asked Trevan if he had solved the riddle of Norgil's presence with the unit. Trevan replied that he had.

"A big act is what Norgil needs," affirmed Trevan, "and he's building one. That's the answer, Comber."

Without knowing it, Trevan had propounded another question by his visit back stage. Norgil put it to Fritz while they were measuring Heloise to find out how well she would fit into the tip-over box.

"I wonder," Norgil said in a whimsical tone, "just why a big night-club owner like Luke Trevan is bothering to put a vaudeville circuit into tank towns like Grand Falls. Can you answer that one, Fritz?"

Fritz couldn't, and admitted so. But he could tell from the gleam that went with Norgil's smile that the magician already had the answer. So far, this tour had been a mystery to Fritz, as well as Miriam. Soon, they would learn the reason behind it.

Of one thing, however, Fritz was already sure. The purposes that had brought Norgil and Trevan to Grand Falls were definitely interlocked.

CHAPTER II.

NORGIN STRIKES OIL.

The Plaza Theater was operating on a three-a-day policy, and the matinee drew a good house. The natives of Grand Falls had come to jeer the show, not knowing that Norgil had rearranged the unit after the last show the night before.

Without Heloise as an opener, the show looked good. The boos that greeted the early turns were soon drowned by applause. Tap dancers clicked in merry style; the monologue brought genuine laughs; the monkeyshines of the contortionist really rollicked the audience.

It was building, act by act, and when Norgil showed the class of a real headliner, the audience was more than satisfied. At the finish, when Heloise tumbled unexpectedly from the box which Norgil had shown empty, the crowd went wild.

Quite as surprised as the audience, the balky seal remembered a stunt that she had long refused to perform at Engler's bidding. Heloise clapped her anterior flippers in true pinniped fashion, thus joining the applause. Mounting a pedestal, she obligingly received the big two-colored ball when the professor tossed it on her nose. The huge sphere was still spinning when the curtain dropped.

Dressed for the street, Norgil was holding another chat with Professor Engler when Miriam arrived, bringing a local newspaper.

"Here's the *Star-Dispatch,*" she said. "It has a good story about that luncheon show you did for the Civic Club. But the new number of *Variety* won't be in until five o'clock."

Reading the account in the *Star-Dispatch,* Norgil noted the names of persons he had met at the luncheon. Practically all of the town's leading citizens had been present. Absent, however, was the name of Luke Trevan, just as its owner had been absent from the affair.

Trevan did not belong in Grand Falls. Though he was still stopping at the Cataract Hotel, where the Civic Club met, he had not been invited to the luncheon. Comber had explained, rather reluctantly, that

Trevan would probably be recognized when he purchased the Plaza Theater. But until the deal was completed, Trevan did not rate.

One fact bothered Comber. Some friends of Trevan were in town with him; men with experience in night clubs. Comber was afraid that Trevan was grooming them to manage theaters like the Plaza, in Grand Falls and other towns. Anxious to hold his own job when the change came, Comber was highly pleased because Norgil had improved the show.

Leaving Comber talking with Professor Engler, Norgil slid out through the stage door, beckoning for Fritz and Miriam to follow. They seated themselves in Norgil's wide coupé, and the magician drove around the town, something that he had been doing every day. By way of adding to the mystery, Norgil pulled into a service station, and drove the coupé up an elevated track.

"An oil change," he told the attendant. "Put in Supreme. I've heard it's the best there is."

"You aren't the only one," replied the attendant. "They all think the same about Supreme."

Fritz gave a puzzled look past Miriam.

"Say, boss," said Fritz. "Why all the oil changes? You've had one in every town. What's it all about?"

Norgil caught a smile from Miriam.

"Ask her, Fritz."

"I can't give the whole answer," replied Miriam, with a slow shake of the head. "But there's one thing, Fritz. In every other town, they have knocked Supreme Motor Oil. In Grand Falls, they still seem to like it."

While Fritz was scratching his head, Norgil pointed across the street to a corner building that bore a sign:

AJAX MIXED PAINTS

Half behind the Ajax plant, between it and a machine shop, a large truck was unloading barrels that bore a single word, marked with stenciled letters: "Turpentine."

"Nice-looking barrels," observed Norgil. "Do you think they hold fifty gallons, Fritz?"

Fritz shook his head.

"Not big enough."

"Turpentine usually comes in fifty-gallon lots," remarked Norgil. "It's odd, how much of it the Ajax plant is using, all in those smaller barrels. They look heavy, too, those barrels, as if they had metal drums inside them."

The oil change was finished. Norgil backed the car down the track and drove around the block, passing the machine shop, which looked closed. Heading for the Cataract Hotel, he stopped near a taxicab stand.

"Fritz and I are going to buy some paint," Norgil told Miriam. "We're taking a cab, and I want you to follow and stay across the way, in the coupé. When a fellow with a weasel face comes out of the place, trail him. His name is Claude Gremble; he owns the Ajax Paint Co. If he meets anyone, hurry back to the theater and tell me. Otherwise, stay close to him until it's time for the supper show."

The Ajax Paint Co. had a very tiny office, occupied by a dumb stenographer and a drowsy office boy. Norgil gave his name; he and Fritz were ushered into an office marked "Private" where they met Gremble, the man with the weasel face.

Gremble was really enthusiastic. He had seen Norgil's show at the Civic Club, and regarded this visit as an honor. But Norgil promptly turned it into a business trip, by describing the new show that he was building. It was practically complete, Norgil explained, except for the painting. A lot of paint would be needed, and Norgil hoped that Gremble could sell him some at wholesale.

Though he seemed nervous while Norgil talked, Gremble supplied a weasel smile at the conclusion. He led his visitors into a small stock room, where sealed cans of paint were on the shelves, and invited them to choose the colors that they needed.

"Of course, we have a large supply," remarked Gremble, gesturing toward a locked door. "These are merely samples; the rest is in the storeroom."

Norgil began to order paint in quantities that astounded Fritz. All the while, Gremble nodded, but he seemed as nervous as before. Beckoning them back into his office, he glanced at his watch and found that it was after five o'clock. They went into the outer office, where Gremble spoke to the stenographer.

"Have you the records on Silver Glow?" he queried. Then, turning to Norgil: "That's the color you particularly wanted. We may be short of it at present."

The stenographer didn't have the records. Smilingly, Gremble remembered that he had taken them home. He asked if Norgil could stop out and see him later, to which Norgil agreed. Dismissing his two-person staff, Gremble closed the office and offered to take Norgil and Fritz back to the theater in his car. Indicating the taxicab, Norgil recalled that its meter was still running and decided that he and Fritz had better use it.

Instead of returning to the theater, Norgil had the cab travel around town, much to the driver's enjoyment. The cabby did not know that Norgil had already covered most of Grand Falls in his own car; nor was he surprised when Norgil finally had him stop at the edge of Grandview Park.

Lots of visitors liked to alight at the park and walk through to town, passing the falls on the way. But as soon as the cab departed, Norgil motioned Fritz in the opposite direction. Through gathering dusk, a walk of a few blocks brought them to the deserted machine shop which flanked the Ajax Paint Co.

"Wait here," Norgil told Fritz, "and be ready to signal me if anyone shows up."

With a set of special picks once owned by the famous Houdini, Norgil rapidly entered the machine shop. The place had benches, which bore old lathes and other equipment long in disuse. Shelves revealed boxes, filled with junk, the only items of value consisting of ball bearings, stowed on a corner shelf.

Norgil was working on the theory that the machine shop would not be deserted unless it connected in some way with the paint plant. Looking for a clue, he found it in the shape of shelves, which looked as old as the rest, but which gave themselves away by the bright nails with which they were studded.

Using an old hammer that was lying with some discarded tools, Norgil pried away an upright strip of wood. The result proved better than he expected. The faked shelves, built of old wood, were attached to a door nailed from the other side. Under the hard jolts from Norgil's shoulder, the door gave.

Amid the shriek of rusted hinges, the creak of old wood, Norgil tumbled down some steps into the storeroom of the Ajax plant. His flashlight first showed big doors at the rear; heavily barred, they formed the route to the trucking entrance, where the barrels had been unloaded.

Next, barrels themselves, enough to supply the Ajax Co. for a year, assuming that the contents were turpentine. Swinging the light across the huge room, Norgil saw something else beyond a large expanse of concrete floor.

This inner warehouse was shelved from floor to ceiling, holding thousands of paint cans, ten times the amount that Norgil had seen in Gremble's smaller stock room. One corner was filled with quart cans of Silver Glow, as evidenced by the labels—the very type of paint that Gremble claimed was nearly out of stock!

One can was all that Norgil wanted. Taking it, he went back through the machine shop, wedging the shelved door in place. Reaching the far street, he came upon Fritz, who was on the watch for prowlers. With a nudge, Norgil told his assistant to come along.

They reached the park, where darkness had fully settled. Stopping at a deserted bench, Norgil produced the paint can from beneath his coat. Under the gleam of a park light, he used a knife with a punch blade to jab two holes in the can top. He told Fritz to hold his hands cupped.

Then, into the palms of his astonished assistant, Norgil poured a quantity of thick, smooth fluid—not the aluminum paint that Fritz expected from a can of Silver Glow, but deep green motor oil, that might have been the product of the Supreme refinery.

Norgil had struck oil through his visit to the Ajax Paint Co. He had brought back a sample that represented thousands of gallons of the same stuff, stored in a place where it never belonged!

CHAPTER III.

BOOTLEG METHOD.

Fritz wanted an explanation and deserved one, considering the circumstances. Chucking the oil can off into the bushes, Norgil turned to his assistant.

"Rub that oil into your hands, Fritz," he said. "It will do them good, even though it is cheap stuff."

"Cheap stuff?"

"Old oil from drained crankcases," explained Norgil. "Filtered and reclaimed. They've been shipping it into Grand Falls from everywhere, under the head of turpentine. Then they've put it into quart cans, and sent it out under paint labels."

Norgil was walking toward the theater. Fritz kept beside him, putting eager questions.

"Who's 'they'? Gremble?"

"He's only the front," replied Norgil. "The local man who sold out to the racket. Only one man around here is big enough to be managing this graft. Luke Trevan."

Steadily, Norgil detailed the crooked game. It began with Supreme Motor Oil, one of the finest products on the market. Lately, that brand had not been standing up. Reports in the consumers' bulletins had given it a rap the company couldn't understand, until they bought some of their own oil, at retail, and put it to the test.

"It was bootleg," Norgil told Fritz. "Sold at cut rates to service stations, giving them an extra profit that was trivial compared to the take that the racketeers got from such trade."

Fritz didn't ask how Norgil had learned the story of Supreme's troubles. Norgil had ways of hearing many things through various friends and contacts. More interesting to Fritz was how Norgil had traced the racket to its source in Grand Falls.

"Simple enough," Norgil explained. "Grand Falls was the largest town where there were no complaints about poor grade oil. The Supreme people thought the racket hadn't reached here. I had a hunch that the crooks were using Grand Falls as a base, and didn't want to run risks so close to home."

Fritz could picture the rest. He knew, at last, why Norgil had booked into Grand Falls with a small-time vaudeville unit. It was the best way to see the town, and carrying unfinished apparatus was a bluff for people like Luke Trevan. It had also served to acquaint Norgil with Claude Gremble.

In looking over local industries, Norgil had picked the Ajax Paint Co. as the logical blind for the bootleg oil racket. The plant's hunger for turpentine; large shipments of paint going out, could mean that oil was the real story. Norgil's talk about the new show that he was building had lulled Trevan the night before and Gremble this afternoon.

"The oil goes into cans at the Ajax plant," concluded Norgil, as he and Fritz neared the theater, "and Trevan's men are the truckers. They must get rid of the paint labels before they deliver. The fellows at the other end are supplied with counterfeit Supreme labels, along with the cans of oil.

"We'll go through with the supper show, Fritz, so we won't be suspected. After that, we'll have the police raid the Ajax plant. Those cans of oil, with their paint labels, are evidence enough to convict Gremble. He'll squeal eventually on Trevan, and meanwhile, the racket will be through."

Confident that he had outguessed the crooks, Norgil voiced no concern for Miriam, nor was Fritz worried. The girl had undertaken a very simple task in trailing Gremble, who apparently suspected nothing. The fact that Miriam wasn't back at the theater when Norgil and Fritz arrived there was proof in itself that Gremble had not contacted Trevan.

In fact, Miriam was following what seemed a mere routine as she sat in Norgil's coupé across the street from a pretentious house. The place was Gremble's residence; the paint man had gone directly home after leaving his office. From where she watched, Miriam could see Gremble at a window of his living room, reading the evening newspaper.

Miriam's wrist watch showed nine minutes to seven. The supper show would begin at seven o'clock, but she could wait until then and still have time to reach the theater before Norgil's act went on. Miriam was settling herself for the last stretch when she saw the lights of a car on a street behind Gremble's house.

The lights were extinguished. Watching intently, Miriam saw a creeping man come through the grounds beside the house. He stopped at the door of a sun porch and rapped cautiously. Gremble heard it; he came and unlocked the door.

A streak of light from the living room gave Miriam a momentary view of the stranger's face. The man was Luke Trevan. He kept to the darkness of the porch while Gremble went into the living room and turned off all lights except a corner lamp. By then, Miriam was out of the coupé, which was fortunately shielded by trees. Hurrying across the street, the girl crept to the porch entrance, just as the two men went indoors.

The porch offered Mirian the shelter that it had given Gremble. The French door to the living room had a wide crack, through which she could hear the conversation. The panels were glass, and the curtains on the other side thin enough to allow a hazy view, despite the dimness of the single lamp.

"I thought so," Trevan was saying in a low-pitched growl. "Norgil is wise. That's why he came to your place this afternoon."

"But he didn't see the storeroom," protested Gremble. "I didn't let him in there, Luke."

"He saw enough," retorted Trevan. "That guy knows how to build funny cabinets that fool the eye. One look at the outside of your dump would tell him that he hadn't seen half of what was in it. How long will it take us to clear the place out?"

"At least an hour, Luke, after you get the trucks there. I'll get right down to the office."

"Wait!"

Miriam watched Trevan's dim figure pace the floor; it looked like the mechanical shape of a robot. Finally the racketeer halted, his hulk blotting out sight of Gremble, who was half huddled by a table.

"I'll handle the oil," announced Trevan. "You've got to hold off Norgil. He'll be through his show too soon for us."

"But I can't go to the theater, Luke," protested Gremble. "It would only be a give-away."

"You don't have to go there. Norgil said he would come out here, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he won't come—"

"And both the stenographer and the office boy heard him, didn't they?"

Gremble mouthed another "yes." Trevan guffawed. Miriam saw him pick up an object and hand it to Gremble. She identified the thing as a telephone.

"Call the police chief," ordered Trevan. "Tell him that Norgil tried to blackmail you; that he's on his way here, right now, to threaten you further."

"But how will that help?"

"It will give you a start," explained Trevan. "When Chief Harper gets here and finds you missing, he'll go down and question Norgil, which will give us the time we need. If you have to lam, you'll be on your way; if things blow over, you can come back and say you just ducked out for a while, because of Norgil's threat. They'll believe your word as much as his."

Gremble took the telephone. Miriam heard his call to police headquarters. He put a real quaver into his voice, as he talked to Chief Harper. Gremble's tone was pleading as he urged the chief to come to the house right away. The Norgil threat was imminent, the way Gremble put it.

As Gremble dropped the receiver on the hook, Miriam heard him give a weak, but satisfied chuckle. His figure was visible, as he turned toward Trevan, to ask:

"How did I do, Luke—"

The query ended with a screech from Gremble. The scream, too, was finished in abrupt style, by the muffled blast of a revolver. Amid a whirl of impressions, Miriam couldn't realize what had happened, until she saw Gremble's frail form drop away, strike the table, and crumple to the floor.

In Trevan's big fist was the revolver that had delivered a single bullet to Gremble's heart. No more shots were needed. From the gun muzzle coiled a vanishing curl of smoke that might well have represented Gremble's wraith, bound for the Hereafter.

Murder had disposed of the one man who could talk; murder that would be attributed to Norgil, bringing complete ruin to the magician's well-laid plans!

CHAPTER IV.

THROUGH THE CORDON.

Whatever Miriam might have done in those next tense moments were matters to be thought of later. Sheer instinct was more important than any effort to block Trevan's escape. The killer had a gun; the fact that he didn't know of Miriam's presence offered the girl a chance for self-preservation.

Dropping away from the door, Miriam crouched behind an obscure wicker chair and huddled there while Trevan hurriedly crossed the porch on his way out. The girl's hand clutched the leg of a flimsy table, but she realized that the weapon would be useless, unless Trevan discovered her. Even then, her chances of life would have proven slim.

Fortunately, Trevan kept on his way. He was trying to stuff the gun in his coat pocket, but a bundle of paper prevented him. Shifting the gun, he poked it into the pocket on the other side. Still crouched, Miriam listened until she heard the sound of Trevan's departing motor.

Shakily, the girl fled for Norgil's car. She knew that she would have to get away before the police chief arrived; otherwise there would be new complications. Not wanting Norgil's car to be recognized on the main street, Miriam took a roundabout route to the theater. As she lost her way among dead-end streets, she was gripped by the frantic fear that every moment of delay might make the future worse for Norgil.

Miriam's fears seemed realized when she finally reached the theater. Norgil's act had started; he was in the midst of the cigarette routine, while Fritz was setting tables for the tricks to come. It wouldn't do to dash on-stage and shout at either of them. Miriam's only choice was to hurry into costume and speak her piece at the first opportunity.

Wildly discarding her street attire, Miriam was panic-stricken when she heard a heavy rap at the door. She had visions of police, already on hand, to arrest her, along with Norgil and Fritz. Caught between costumes, Miriam was madly searching for a dressing gown that she couldn't find when she heard the voice of Professor Engler beyond the door:

"Hurry, please, Miss Laymond! You're due on-stage in a few minutes!"

Miriam's helpless feeling ended with a sigh. She had forgotten that the professor was serving as call boy, since his act had been blotted from the bill. Stammering that she was almost ready, Miriam scrambled into her scanty ballet costume and came from the dressing room.

The cannon music had started. Pirouetting on the stage, Miriam was loaded into the big gun. Her face away from the audience, she was telling Norgil what had happened—a hard task, considering the loudness of the music.

"Trevan murdered Gremble," voiced Miriam. "He had Gremble call the police, to say you threatened him. Right afterward, Trevan shot him—"

Miriam was sliding down into the cannon as she spoke. Her words were drowned in a blast a hundred times louder than the report she had heard at Gremble's. When Miriam next saw Norgil, he was helping her from the triple trunks.

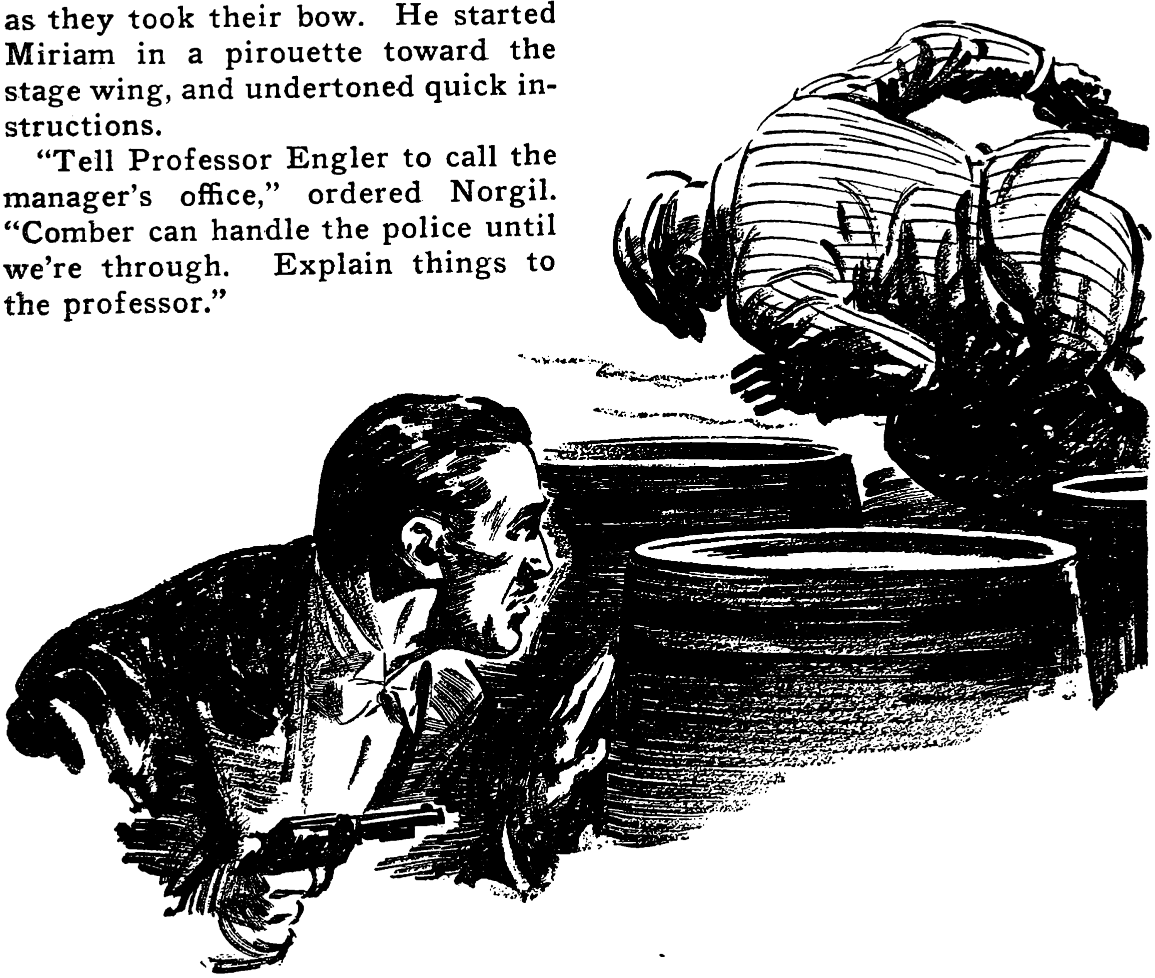
"If the police get here," the girl added, "they'll hold you. It will give Trevan time to clear out Gremble's storeroom. He said he'd have some trucks there—"

Norgil was motioning for silence as they took their bow. He started Miriam in a pirouette toward the stage wing, and undertoned quick instructions.

"Tell Professor Engler to call the manager's office," ordered Norgil. "Comber can handle the police until we're through. Explain things to the professor."

Though poor at handling trained seals, Engler proved himself competent enough at other matters, when Miriam relayed Norgil's instructions. Meanwhile, Norgil and Fritz were busily entertaining the audience by producing Heloise from the empty box. The cue came for the finale; both Miriam and Engler went on-stage, to join the rest of the company.

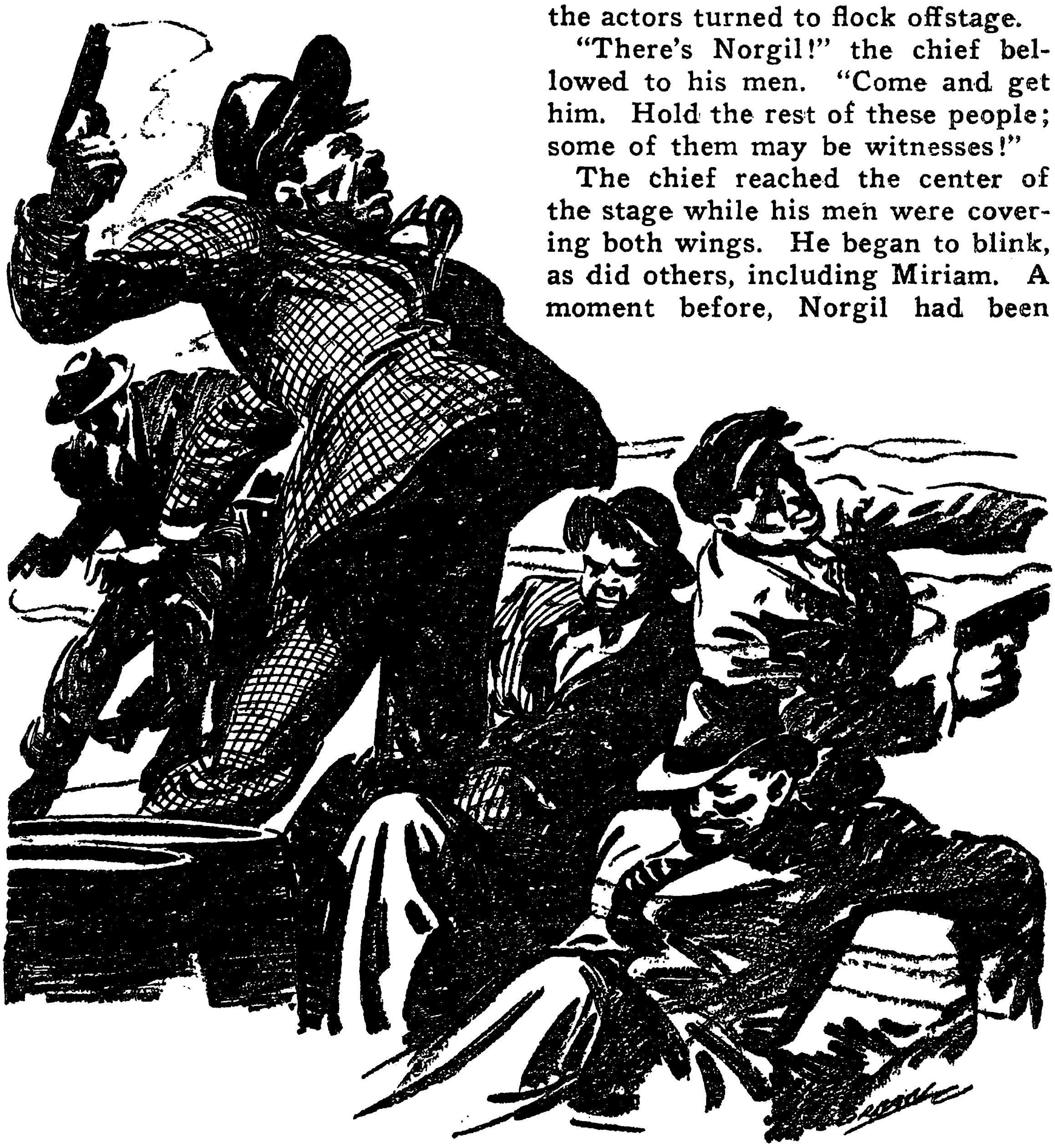
While Engler was stepping to one wing to get the balancing ball, Miriam saw Comber arrive at the other side of the stage. The manager was just in time. Men in blue were invading the stage door, headed by a bulky, red-faced individual,



Norgil was sheltered behind the barrels as the first shots pinged against walls and ceilings!

who was obviously Police Chief Harper.

Miriam was close enough to overhear the arguments that Comber offered the police chief. If they wanted Norgil, they could take him in a very few minutes. He was in plain sight, and still would be, when the curtain fell. But a police invasion at this moment might produce a riot in the theater.



Chief Harper nodded his agreement. He kept watching Norgil, who was turned the other way pointing to Professor Engler. In his turn, the professor was taking bows for Heloise, who was spinning the huge ball on her nose. The curtain fell so suddenly that Chief Harper didn't realize that the show was over until the actors turned to flock offstage.

"There's Norgil!" the chief bellowed to his men. "Come and get him. Hold the rest of these people; some of them may be witnesses!"

The chief reached the center of the stage while his men were covering both wings. He began to blink, as did others, including Miriam. A moment before, Norgil had been among the other actors. Right now, the magician was gone!

Everyone halted at Harper's shout. Striding back and forth across the stage, the police chief eyed the performers; then glanced about at Norgil's paraphernalia, which still decorated the stage.

"Send them to their dressing rooms one by one," the chief told his men. "Keep them there until we've found Norgil. Come on, all of you"—stepping to the wing, Harper gave a sweeping gesture—"and I'll look you over when you go by."

Miriam and the girls went first, while the chief scanned them as though suspecting that Norgil might have donned feminine costume. Stopping Fritz, Harper studied him closely, decided he couldn't be Norgil, and sent him on his way. Next came Professor Engler, smoothing his handle-bar mustache with one hand, while he rolled the balancing ball with the other. Behind him waddled Heloise. The professor paused, and spoke to the chief.

"Don't forget Heloise," Engler advised. Then, with a cackly laugh: "She must be Norgil, in disguise."

"Get along!" snapped the police chief. "You and that pet of yours! I see the fellow I want."

Rolling the ball to the wing, the professor shooed the seal ahead of him, and glanced back to watch the police chief pounce on the contortionist who wore the monkey suit. The baboon's head came away, to disclose a face that wasn't Norgil's. The stage was cleared of performers. The chief gestured to a pair of officers.

"We're going to take this stuff apart." He pointed to Norgil's apparatus. "Norgil is hiding somewhere, right here among us."

Search of the cannon and the triple chests produced no trace of Norgil. The police chief came to the square box from which the magician had brought Heloise. He and his men opened the box—and found it empty.

"Wait, though!" growled the police chief. "Slap it shut again, the way Norgil did, when he brought the seal out of it. Maybe—"

They slammed the box lid. A thud came from inside. Springing upon the little platform, the police chief aimed his revolver, and yanked the box lid upward, with his other hand.

"Out of there, Norgil—"

The onlookers saw Chief Harper stare, then shove away his revolver. Stooping, with arms wide apart, he reached for something that filled the box, and brought the object into sight. It didn't happen to be Norgil.

The article that had so mysteriously arrived from nowhere was a great big rubber ball, the plaything of the trained seal, Heloise!

CHAPTER V.

CROOKS AND CONCRETE.

Chief Harper didn't balance the fancy ball on the end of his stubby nose. Instead, he bounced it across the stage, where it knocked over one table and stopped against another. The ball stood as high as the table itself, which added to the chief's perplexity.

He had seen professor Engler roll that ball off the stage. How it had come back into the box on the platform was a riddle, until the chief decided that this must be a duplicate ball. What it had to do with Norgil's disappearance, Chief Harper could not guess; but having found the ball instead of the magician, he felt that one mystery might solve the other. Since the ball belonged to Engler, the police chief headed to the professor's dressing room.

Engler tried to explain something when the chief entered, but Heloise drowned him out with a series of raucous barks. From the way the police chief pawed around the place, the seal thought it was part of a new act. Not finding the other ball, Chief Harper demanded to know where it was.

"I rolled it into Norgil's dressing room," began Engler. "If you'll listen, I can explain—"

The police chief didn't wait. Reaching Norgil's door, he found it unlocked. Shoving the door open, he saw the only explanation that he wanted, in the very middle of the floor. There lay the other ball, but except for size and outward appearance it was quite different from the rubber sphere that Heloise loved to balance.

This ball was a hollow one, constructed of thin metal. Its secret was apparent, for it was broken apart, in two hemispheres, which lay like giant bowls, side by side. Beyond the demolished ball was an open window; as Chief Harper stared in that direction, he saw the blink of car lights; heard the sudden roar of a motor.

"There goes Norgil!" bawled the chief. "The professor is working with him. He had this fake ball behind a curtain on the stage. That's where Norgil went, into this ball, so Engler could roll it off. They left the real ball in the box!"

Out of his dressing room, Professor Engler was wildly trying to be heard, but between the bellows of the police chief and the fresh barks from Heloise, he didn't have a chance. Harper yelled for an officer to shove Engler back in his dressing room and keep him there. Together, the professor and a grabbing cop stumbled over Heloise, who was waddling out to see the fun.

Miriam reached the flattened pair, to find the professor stunned. Moreover, he had lost his ornate mustache in the fall. Miriam called for Chief Harper, but by then he was gone with his entire squad, in quest of Norgil. All that the girl could do was appeal to the officer who had custody of Engler. They agreed to revive the professor and learn what he had to tell.

Meanwhile, Norgil was leading the police a neat chase in his coupé. Rather than waste time in explanations from a jail cell, Norgil had gone through the cordon, with Engler's aid. Once in the clear, however, he needed the police to help him in the trapping of a real murderer, Luke Trevan.

Zigzagging through streets that he had learned well, Norgil picked landmarks that took the chase from town. Doubling back, he gained a lead, at the same time impressing his pursuers with his ultimate destination, the Ajax Paint plant. Still thinking of Norgil as the killer of Claude Gremble, the police naturally supposed that he might have some purpose for visiting the dead man's office.

Halting a few blocks short, Norgil saw that the trucks had arrived. On foot, he reached his own route, through the machine shop. Finding the shelved door, Norgil unwedged it. He looked into a wide-floored storeroom, beyond.

The truckers were working under lights, with Luke Trevan in charge. They were removing barrels of alleged turpentine, along with cans of so-called paint. But there were more of them than Norgil expected to find. He calculated that they outnumbered the police squad at least two to one.

Added to that, the police were arriving in foolhardy fashion. Norgil had expected them to cut off their sirens when they guessed his destination. Instead, they were coming with all the noise of a governor's escort. This wasn't going to work as Norgil planned it.

No chance for Norgil to fire a few shots that would excite the crooks, and make them easy prey for stealthily advancing police. A surprise was needed to force the crooks into showing their hand, and such an element had vanished, withered away by the sirens' wails. Norgil saw Trevan assemble his men; watched them crouch, with drawn guns, in the shelter of the trucks and metal-lined barrels. They were going to give it, as soon as the police appeared; then load up, and get away.

There were a few barrels deep in the storeroom. If Norgil could reach them, they would furnish shelter, but only for a few moments. Yet some such heroic action was needed, to save the police from slaughter. Having brought the officers to this trap, it was up to Norgil.

Drawing his only weapon, a stage revolver loaded with blanks, Norgil took a deep breath as he gripped the shelf beside him. As luck had it, his hand went past the edge of the faked door and reached a solid shelf. He pressed a box, which rattled slightly as he elbowed it.

It was an inspiration. As the shriek of the sirens blared from a block away, Norgil hooked the open-topped box under his free arm, and shoved through to the storeroom. Aiming his useless gun at the crouched men outdoors, Norgil blazed away with his blanks.

In more ways than one, those shots counted. They sent the crooks dodging, as well as real fire would have done. The bark of Norgil's gun told the police that something had started at the paint plant. Wheeling into shelter, Trevan saw Norgil sidestepping across the floor toward the barrels, deep in the storeroom.

"It's Norgil!" shouted Trevan. Get him, before he can reload. We'll use those barrels ourselves, and smear the coppers when they pile in after us!"

To a man, the crooks surged for the storeroom. At the barrels, Norgil gave his arm a sweep. The wooden box left his clutch, sent its contents scattering about the darkish concrete floor, scarcely noticed by the inrushing crooks. Even their smart leader, Luke Trevan, hadn't an idea of what was coming.

Norgil was over the barrels, down into shelter, as the first wide shots pinged the wall above him. After that, no bullets came within twenty feet of him. Slugs were flattening against the floor and ceiling, missing the walls entirely.

Small wonder, considering that Trevan and his band of a dozen were somersaulting everywhere. Their feet flying out from under them, they had no chance to aim with their hands. Nor were they able to save their heads. The falls that they took were hard ones, that brought skulls in direct contact with concrete.

The arriving police would have skidded, too, if Norgil had not come up to shout a warning. He was pitching paint cans at the few crooks who managed to rise. Norgil was too deep in the storeroom to be identified; Chief Harper saw him only as an unarmed man, who had somehow managed to stave off a dozen ruffians, who had gone after him with guns.

A tiny ball of steel stopped rolling at Harper's feet. Picking it up, the chief squinted at the floor. He saw a hundred other glimmers, as he strained his eyes, and made out the box beyond them. Officers were pointing to bullet-punctured paint cans along the walls, observing that oil was gushing from them.

The situation struck home to the police chief, all at once: he could tell who the man in the corner was; the purpose that had brought him here; the method by which he had floored a dozen crooks in a single sweep.

"Come on out, Norgil," called the chief. "I'd like to know the rest of this. Look out, though; don't go stepping on any of those ball bearings that you scattered. We don't want to lug you to the hospital, too."

Norgil came out, sweeping one foot ahead of him, to roll the ball bearings from his path. He picked up the box, and smiled at the marking on it. The box had contained a double gross, two hundred and eighty-eight balls of steel that had proven better than bullets.

Traveling everywhere along the concrete floor, the ball bearings had been like roller skates in a darkened hall. None of the crooks could possibly have missed them; there were too many. Once under foot, the ball bearings did the rest.

"Better take his gun, chief," suggested Norgil, gesturing to the senseless form of Luke Trevan. "It's probably the one he used to kill Claude Gremble. Maybe he intended to plant it on me later, but I doubt it. Trevan didn't even check to learn that I had an air-tight alibi.

"I was at the theater before Gremble called you, getting ready for my act. Miriam can tell you how Trevan hoaxed Gremble, to get rid of him. She was a witness to the murder. All that puzzles me is how Trevan found out what I knew."

Cars were arriving, bringing people from the theater, among them Miriam and Engler. The professor finally managed to get in his say. He was a private operative working for the Supreme Oil Co. who had come on tour at Norgil's invitation. The hollow ball happened to be in the equipment that he had hired, along with Heloise, the trained seal who hadn't lived up to her guarantee.

"It reminded me of the old animated-ball stunt," explained Norgil, "done by a contortionist inside it. I happened to mention the fact once to Engler. When he knew that I'd have to get offstage, through the cordon, he thought of the trick ball, and brought it with the rubber one. It was out of sight until we needed it. Maybe"—Norgil turned to the ex-professor with a grin—"it gave me

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the inspiration for the ball-bearing act, later."

Officers were hauling Luke Trevan from the storeroom. Something fell from the murderer's pocket; the wadded paper that Miriam had noticed, in the gloom of Gremble's porch. Norgil picked it up; it was the current copy of *Variety*. Trevan had evidently bought it shortly after five o'clock.

Eagerly, Norgil thumbed the pages, and found the paragraph that he realized must be there. He showed the headline to Engler and Miriam. It said:

SUPREME OIL TO GO TELEVISION.

Pointing farther down, Norgil indicated his own name as the star of the coming attraction. Engler gave an understanding nod. He already knew about it, though Miriam did not.

"We didn't expect the news to leak," explained Norgil. "The television show was postponed, before Supreme announced it. With bootleg oil cutting into the business, Supreme felt that a large advertising campaign would be a boomerang. Naturally, having a contract with Supreme's new show, I was as anxious as they were to put the skids under the racket."

"Which you did," chuckled Engler, glancing at the floor, with its quota of a dozen groggy, handcuffed crooks, "and you put the skids under the racketeers as well."

Miriam had a comment.

"Then this unit tour is over," she said, with a glad sigh. "No more split weeks; no small towns for us. When I think of tanks—"

"When you think of tanks," blurbed Norgil, in the mock tone of a radio announcer, "think of Supreme Motor Oil!"

THE END.

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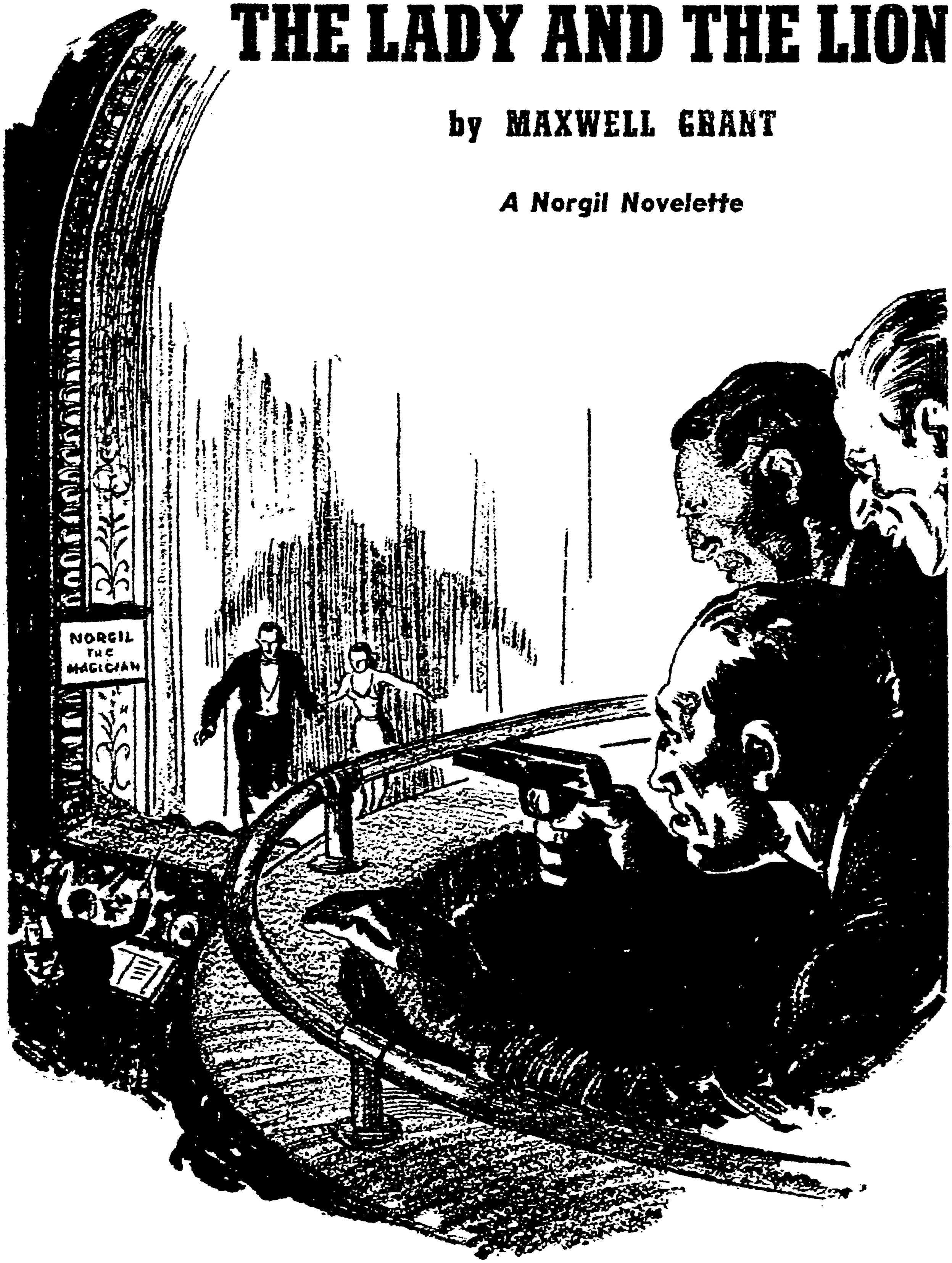


CHAPTER I
THE SHOW GOES ON

THE six o'clock show had reached its climax. A packed audience was watching, breathless and agog, as curtains spread to disclose a full set stage, ready for the final illusion.

From the footlights, where he had finished a close-up paper-tearing trick, Norgil delivered a suave smile. Then, with a gesture toward the background, the magician announced:

"The lady and the lion!"

On one side of the stage stood a huge, curtained cabinet. Its platform was mounted high enough for people to see completely beneath. The cabinet proper was seven feet high; when Norgil pulled the front curtain aside, he revealed a hollow interior, measuring ten feet square.

Politely, Norgil invited members of the audience to come onstage and inspect the cabinet. They arrived promptly, a dozen of them; after walking in and out of the curtained box, they were invited to take chairs near the wing of the stage.

Meanwhile, Norgil was appraising the entire audience. It was a packed house, something unusual for a supper show. Something that Norgil intended to mention to Belker, the theater manager, when they held a forthcoming argument.

For Norgil's thoughts were not entirely on the show. He was figuring how he could get his proper share of the profits that the Isis Theater had been making all week. There were some points on which Norgil and Belker did not agree; the time to thrash them out was coming very soon.

Music swelled from the orchestra; bells supplied a tinkle. It was the cue for the lady to step onstage. Snapping from his reverie, Norgil turned to introduce his charming assistant, Miss Miriam Lamond. The spectators become more intense than ever.

They had seen Miriam often during the show, in various costumes, but none so startling as this. Actually, the trappings were less daring than they looked. Miriam represented an exotic South Sea princess, so her costume was both scant and bejeweled.

Catching the spotlight, the spangles produced a dazzle, giving the impression that the South Sea lady was clad in jewels only.

Lightly, Miriam sprang into the large cabinet; stood in the very center, smiling at the audience, while Norgil drew the front curtain shut. Uniformed assistants were busy adjusting the other curtains along the top edge of the cabinet, which they reached by mounting wheeled steps which served as ladders.

Instructing the committee to watch the cabinet, Norgil crossed the stage to a square glass box that was suspended from the upright posts of a skeleton framework. There were roller blinds along the top edge of the frame; using the wheeled steps to reach them, the assistants drew the blinds downward, to hide the box.

At the center of the stage, Norgil waited impressively, while the music rose with terrific fervor. Smashing cymbals were competing with the bang of kettledrums, adding to the mad, pagan fanfare, when Norgil fired a revolver shot at the great cabinet.

Assistants tugged at ropes; draperies fell away in a flood. A roar answered the fading blare of the orchestra. The lady was gone; but that was trivial.

In her place was a pacing lion, shaggy-maned and powerful, that thrust its huge head against the barred door of a solid, full-sized cage that replaced the fallen curtains!

Committeemen leaped from their chairs, dashed down into the audience, urged to comical flights by Norgil's assistants. They didn't have to run, for Tongo, the lion, was a very friendly beast, despite his ferocious look. But it all helped in paving the way to the surprising sequel.

By the time the spectators were looking back at Norgil, they were really wondering what had happened to the lovely lady. Again, the magician fired his stage revolver, this time at the suspended box. Spring blinds shot upward; the missing brunette was revealed within the walls of glass!

Norgil helped the glittering lady out to the stage; they took two bows, as the curtains closed. Then, in response to the persistent applause that rolled in from the audience, Norgil stepped through the footlights and responded to the deafening outburst.

ALL was changed when the magician returned back through the curtains. The lights were dimmed; assistants had pushed the big cage, Tongo in it, back to a far corner. Miriam had put on slippers and kimono and was going upstairs to her dressing room.

Norgil's dressing room was closer, on a level with the stage, but he did not go there. Instead, he slid back a fireproof door, and took a side aisle, leading out past the boxes. The newsreel had begun, and the spectators were too interested in war scenes to note Norgil when he went by. But the magician was stopped by a pair of burly ushers when he reached the obscure door of the manager's office. Recognizing Norgil, they told him he could enter.

"Mr. Belker will be back in a few minutes," undertoned one. "But he's pretty particular about who we let go in."

"On account of the recent robberies," added the other. "Crooks have been pretty busy here in Westbury lately, and they're getting away with it."

Norgil went into the office, sat down and lighted one of his own cigars, instead of taking a very doubtful perfecto from the open box upon the manager's desk. If ever a man could be open-handed and tight-fisted at the same time, that man was Harvey Belker.

The manager of the Isis Theater was an actor in his own right. He could pose as a good fellow, while he figured ways to chisel. It was his inherent stinginess, however, that gave the game away. The cigars were a good example; Belker proffered them to people in grand style and didn't seem to realize that when the stogies curled, the smokers would recognize the cheapness of his gifts.

Another index to Belker's niggardly nature was the office itself. The carpet was frayed; the furniture battered. The safe in the corner was old and obsolete, which accounted for the ushers standing guard outside. In fact, the only new thing in the place was a large suitcase, that Norgil eyed with interest.

It was more than a suitcase; it was a portable strongbox. Its leather surface hid sides of steel, which Norgil tested, by rapping with his knuckles. The lock was modern, of the combination style. The camouflaged suitcase would be easy to steal, but it would be a troublesome thing to open.

Norgil's cigar was half finished when Belker entered. The theater manager was a bulky man, his big face mostly glower, except when he faked a smile, as he did when he saw Norgil.

"I hear you have some bills for me," remarked Norgil. "Let me see them, Belker."

The bulky man winced. News of his favorite practice must have leaked. His tone casual, he said that the bills covered minor items—repairs to the proscenium arch, where small holes had been drilled; beams for supporting a block and tackle used to haul the lion's cage; chairs rented for committee use.

"They don't amount to much," concluded Belker. "I'll simply deduct the total from your percentage, Norgil—"

"Let me see the bills."

Reluctantly, Belker produced them. They amounted to two hundred, fifty-eight dollars, and seventy-six cents.

Belker knew that an argument was due; he was on his feet to meet it, when Norgil calmly nodded.

"Quite reasonable," he purred. "Just stamp them 'paid' and sign them, Belker."

The theater manger fumed that the bills were legitimate, even though unexpected. He brought out Norgil's contract, insisted that it contained no clause making Belker responsible for what he termed unnecessary expenses.

"We did a good supper show," inserted Norgil, blandly. "There will be a packed house tonight, Belker, unless"—he paused, closed his eyes wearily, and rubbed his hand across his forehead—"you'd better read clause fourteen, Belker."

Reading the paragraph named, Belker found that the contract gave Norgil the right, in case of illness, to cancel any show at two hours' notice.

"You can't get away with this!" stormed Belker. "I'll prove you aren't ill! I'll bring in a physician—"

"And let him feel my pulse," suggested Norgil. "He will find that it has dropped away to nothing. An old Hindu trick, Belker, that fools every doctor who meets with it."

Fuming, the manager stalked the office; finally, he stopped at the desk, picked up a rubber stamp, and pounded the bills with it. Scrawling his initials under the "paid" marks, Belker flung the bills at Norgil, who pocketed them and stepped briskly to the door.

"Odd, how quickly that attack passed," remarked the magician. "I feel a lot better, Belker."

Then, with the door half open, Norgil gave the irate manager a parting smile, and added:

"The show goes on."

CHAPTER II

CLUES TO CRIME

BACK in his dressing room, Norgil found a visitor, a pleasant-faced, middle-aged man, with grayish hair. He introduced himself as Mervin Lorne, and the name brought a prompt nod from Norgil. Lorne was a local merchant, whose store ran large advertisements in the Westbury newspapers. He was also a stanch member of the local civic committee, which was doing its utmost to clean up the crime wave that an inefficient police force had failed to halt.

"We were hoping that you will stay in town through Sunday," began Lorne, in an earnest tone. "We are planning a special show—a show for charity—"

"You'd better talk to Belker," snapped Norgil. "He's the one man who can find ways to make actors work for nothing."

Lorne's earnestness changed to sympathy. He started to say something; then caught himself. In an undertone, he requested:

"Could you have dinner with me, Norgil?"

Sensing something deeper in the invitation, Norgil agreed. They went out by the stage door, around the elbow of a long, deserted alley, and reached Lorne's car, which was manned by a chauffeur. After a half mile ride, they stopped at the town's best restaurant, and were ushered to a private booth, at the rear.

By then, Lorne had heard Norgil's story.

"So, Belker tried to chisel you," commented the gray haired man. "I am not at all surprised. We have heard that he uses such tactics. It fits in with what I am about to tell you."

Lorne beckoned. A solemn man with deep-lined features came over from another table, bringing along a derby hat that he plucked from a hat stand. Lorne introduced the arrival as James Blissop. In a methodical manner, Blissop produced credentials and showed them to Norgil. They identified the owner as a private detective.

"Blissop was brought here by the Civic Committee," explained Lorne. "He has checked on the findings of the police, and has carried his investigation much further. Give us your full report, Blissop."

The solemn-faced operative spread a sheaf of thin, closely-typed papers on the table, and concentrated on the high spots. First, he covered facts that Norgil had read in the newspapers. After every one of five robberies, the police had questioned Trip Shavey, the only local racketeer. Trip, at present operating within the law, had provided alibis for all the members of his so-called mob.

Lorne interrupted at that point.

"It's outrageous!" he declared. "These robberies of jewelry stores, loan offices, finally the Westbury Trust Co., are the sort that no one but Trip would have dared! Yet evidence is lacking—"

"Because of the man higher up," inserted Blissop. "I've pointed that out to you, Mr. Lorne. It took someone who could visit those places unsuspected, to pave the way for a smooth run of quick jobs. What's more, they need a brain to get rid of the hauls.

"There's a lot of candidates; but the one who fills the bill to a T is Harvey Belker. He goes to all those places, to leave this theater placards. What's more, every Friday night, he drives over to Pittsford and gives the box-office receipts to old Martindale, who owns the theater circuit."

Blissop paused, thumbed through the report sheets. He mentioned that the Shavey mob had a favorite alibi. The members claimed that they were at the Isis Theater when the robberies took place. Ushers testified that they had seen them enter before the show, and leave afterward.

"It would be easy to sneak out and in," argued Blissop, pointedly, "particularly if the ushers were told to remember some things, but not others. It looks like a real tie-up, Mr. Lorne."

NORGIL was thinking of another point. This happened to be Friday night. The Westbury Trust robbery was only two days old. When Belker made his trip to the Pittsford tonight, it would be his first chance to take along the stolen bank funds. Norgil waited to see if the others would bring up the fact. They did.

But they produced another important angle; one that the newspapers had not mentioned in connection with the robbery. Lorne had positive information that the twenty-five thousand dollars stolen from the Westbury Trust consisted of listed currency.

"If we can prove that Belker has that money," insisted Lorne, "we will have the goods on him, and the Shavey mob, as well. That's where you can help us, Norgil."

"Belker carries the theater funds in a steel suitcase," added Blissop, "and he has the nerve"—the operative inserted a snort—"to ask for a police escort to take him clear into Pittsford."

"We might have him arrested there, Blissop—"

"And lose out, if he was fox enough to outguess us? We'd be sunk, if we did that, Mr. Lorne. No, you'd better tell Norgil our original plan, and get him to help us."

Lorne explained the plan. It was to substitute an identical suitcase for the one that Belker used, just before the theater manager started his Friday night trip to Pittsford. Lorne and Blissop would then speed ahead, and reach Martindale first.

A close friend of the circuit owner, Lorne would explain matters to Martindale, and let him open Belker's suitcase, since Martindale would unquestionably know the combination. If the bank money proved to be with the theater receipts, Belker would be arrested on arrival. If not, Martindale could simply take the duplicate from Belker, and give him back the original.

"We could work the same stunt over again, then," put in Blissop. "But what we can't do, is let Belker go out of here with his own suitcase. He'd have too many chances to drop the bank dough somewhere in Pittsford. That's what he's done with the other stuff the Shavey mob stole."

It was quite plain how Norgil fitted into the scheme of things. Belker's office was a stronghold. When unlocked, two ushers guarded it. After theater hours, its strong door was locked. The present job called for a visit there, at a particular time; namely, just before Belker started on his trip to Pittsford. Norgil, it so happened, was the only man in town who had free access to the office—except Belker himself.

Carrying a suitcase in and out, under the noses of the ushers, was another problem; one that Lorne and Blissop hoped Norgil's ingenuity could solve. While the magician was pondering over the prospect, and getting nowhere, Lorne suddenly snapped his fingers.

"I have it!" Lorne told them. "We can send in a package addressed to Norgil, with the duplicate suitcase inside it. When you go to Belker's office"—Lorne had turned to Norgil—"you can change the suitcases, and bring out the package. We'll be waiting in my car, so you can join us."

The idea was excellent. Blissop added that he could find a way to draw Belker to the box-office long enough for Norgil to make the switch. The only trouble was that Belker usually left the theater before the stage show was over. Lorne asked if Norgil could send someone to the office in his stead. The magician shook his head.

"No," he said, "but I can handle it quite easily during my ghost act. The stage is dark for five minutes, with spooks floating all over it. I don't have to be there.

"Moreover, I'll have a good excuse for staying in the office a few minutes. The box-office reports will be there, covering the entire week. It's only natural that I would want to look them over before Belker leaves."

The plan complete, Blissop left the restaurant, and Norgil dined with Lorne. They no longer discussed the trapping of Belker; their conversation concerned the charity show that Lorne had mentioned. A far more generous person than the stingy theater manager, Lorne volunteered to pay Norgil a fair-sized fee out of his own pocket, with the understanding that the arrangement would be a confidential one.

Norgil was smiling when he left the restaurant, to return to the theater by cab. It wasn't because he had booked a special show at a price that made it worth while. His real thrill came when he looked forward to the night's adventure.

It would give him another chance to strike at crime, to add a new exploit to a string of similar accomplishments which had given him repute as a detective along with his fame as a magician. In addition, there was the matter of Belker.

Norgil had found his chance finally to settle his feud with the glowery theater manager in a manner which Belker would remember for a long while to come.

CHAPTER III
CROOKS IN THE KNOW

HARVEY Belker was in his office when Norgil stopped there. The theater manager made no reference to their settled dispute; in fact he seemed genuinely cordial, as though he admired Norgil for having outwitted him. He even offered the magician a cigar from his pocket, instead of from the box on his desk.

When Norgil mentioned the matter of box-office reports, Belker promised to have them in the office early, along with a signed check, for the magician's percentage. Then:

"It's been a big week, Norgil," affirmed Belker. "We've broken all records. I just talked to Mr. Martindale by long distance; he hopes you'll consider us for a return engagement."

Norgil smiled; he was understanding the reason for Belker's sudden affability.

"You've got a great show," Belker went on, "particularly the finish. The Lady and the Lion wows them, out front. For a while, some of the wiseacres thought you were using twin girls, but they've given up that theory."

"Only one lady," returned Norgil, with a smile, "and only one lion."

"The lady travels mighty quick," conceded Belker. "It's only about ten seconds between the time when you fire at the cabinet, and when you shoot at the glass box. But I still like the lion. He looks alive; different from some of those moth-eaten brutes that they drag along with punk animal acts."

"Tongo is an old trouper," said Norgil. "Any circus man would know him. He used to work in Roxoni's act, before I bought him."

Belker didn't seem to recall Roxoni, which wasn't surprising, since the animal trainer had never played in theaters. He remarked, too, that he knew very few circus men. Conversation lagging, Norgil left to prepare for the last show.

Outside the office door he ran into the two ushers. One had just come on duty; mistaking Norgil for Belker, the fellow turned, with the comment:

"Trip Shavey and his mob just moved in, boss. They've gone down to their usual box—"

The other usher inserted a warning psst. Suddenly recognizing Norgil, the first fellow stammered explanations.

"We... we're just supposed to keep an eye on them," he said. "You know... well, maybe you don't know, Mr. Norgil, but—"

"They've used Mr. Belker as the goat," put in the second usher. "He's tired of being called in to alibi them. That's all there is to it."

Passing the box, Norgil glanced through the curtains, saw a cluster of half a dozen men watching the feature picture. Continuing backstage, he reached his dressing room. Calling in Fritz, his chief assistant, Norgil arranged a new schedule for the show, putting the ghost act closer to the finale.

WHEN the curtain rose on Norgil's show, the magician set to work in smooth style producing bouquets of flowers, bringing bowls of goldfish and huge urns of fire from the folds of large silk cloths. It wasn't until he reached the cigarette-catching act that he looked over the six men in the box.

It was easy to pick out Trip Shavey. The Westbury bad man was chunky, with a big-jawed, square-shaped face that nestled deep between his hunched shoulders. Arms folded, he sat like a king among an assorted lot of retainers.

Trip had apparently picked up his followers from various walks of life. None had a distinctly thuggish look; that wouldn't have done in a small city like Westbury. Still, all were the sort of gentry to be avoided in dark alleys, or even in theater boxes.

It was evident that most of them had seen the show before; the way they cocked their heads together, giving nods and shakes, was proof that they were discussing the tricks they witnessed. Proceeding with the act, Norgil forgot them for the time.

When the stage blackened for the ghost act Norgil moved out through the aisle, passing the box in total darkness. He was carrying a revolver loaded with bona fide cartridges instead of blanks, just in case any of Trip's mob should be at large with similar weapons handy.

At the office door, Norgil came upon the two ushers. This time both were startled. They thought that the magician was on the stage with the spooks.

"I just came through to look over the reports," informed Norgil, with a friendly chuckle. "Mr. Belker said they would be in the office."

Satisfied that Norgil wasn't one of his own ghosts, the ushers passed him through; one of them remarked that a package had arrived for the magician, and was in the office, alongside of Belker's desk. Three minutes later, Norgil came out, bringing the package with him. It was a sizable package, considerably larger than Belker's metal suitcase. It was quite heavy, too, but Norgil managed it with one arm, as he went back along the aisle.

HE was keeping the package against his left side, toward the theater box, as he passed. No one challenging him, Norgil pocketed his gun before he reached the stage. Continuing to the dressing room, he ripped open the roughly wrapped package, and put the locked suitcase beneath the makeup table. Dumping the cartridges from his revolver, Norgil replaced them with blanks.

The ghosts had finished their cavort. Norgil was onstage when the lights appeared, with assistants wheeling on trunks, cabinets, and huge metal tubes from a series of illusions called The Triple Mystery.

Lights appeared at the back of the theater; Norgil saw Belker hurrying out from the office, carrying a suitcase. Then, Norgil was shooting away with blanks, while girls disappeared from cabinets and tubes, to arrive in trunks, and vice versa.

Miriam was among the vanishing contingent. After one of her rapid disappearances, she arrived off-stage and went through the same door that Norgil had used on his trips to Belker's office. She was scheduled to arrive at the back of the audience, and usually she went around by the stage alley. But the outside route was a long one at the Isis Theater, and Miriam was using the inside way instead.

She was attired in a Pierrot costume of darkish pattern; but, rather than be seen too soon, Miriam stopped close to the curtains of a box. As she waited there, she caught snatches of a conversation that interested her immensely.

"Norgil pulled a smart sneak," a rough voice undertoned, "but he doesn't know that Jerry is working with us, and saw him lug that package into his dressing room."

Miriam recognized the name Jerry as belonging to the man on duty at the stage door. She realized that the speaker must be Trip Shavey, the Westbury big shot. Remembering the newspaper accounts of the alibis, Miriam could guess the route the crooks used; through a side exit, leading out into the back alley, where Jerry could tip them off when all was clear.

"When he finishes the show," added Trip, "we'll lay for him out in the alley. He'll have the swag right with him—"

Trip halted. Peering through the curtains, Miriam saw him speaking to a scrawny, pasty-faced hoodlum who had turned full about. She heard Trip query: "What is it, Geek?" Then Miriam realized that the pasty man was nudging toward the curtains.

Momentarily, Miriam was petrified. Pistol shots from the stage brought her back to life; they were her cue. Whisking from the curtains, Miriam sidled rapidly along the aisle, to the back of the theater. Then, in response to the final report, she dashed down the center aisle, shouting: "Here I am!"

Miriam's return to the stage was the finish of the Triple Mystery. But she didn't have a chance to speak to Norgil, amid the *ta-da-dahhh* of the orchestra. There would be plenty of time, though, later. At present Miriam had to hurry off stage and shed the Pierrot costume, to be ready for the lion illusion.

The girl didn't glance toward Trip's box as she went offstage. It was well, perhaps, that she did not. A gun muzzle was poking under the rail of the box, following her march.

"Shall I give it, Trip?"

"Cripes, no!" Trip pulled the gunner's hand back. "Put away that heater, Morry!"

"But the dame listened in."

"I know. We'll handle her." Turning from Morry, Trip questioned: "What was it you were telling me, Geek? You know—about Roxoni, the guy that used to do the lion act?"

Geek whispered details. Watching the stage, where Norgil had begun the paper-tearing routine, Trip Shavey chuckled. He spoke confidently to the listeners about him.

Don't worry about the dame" assured Trip. "She'll never spill what she knows. After what's going to happen, Norgil will be a setup when we meet him outside."

CHAPTER IV
THE VANISHED VICTIM

THE paper trick was over. With curtains spreading to display the huge draped cabinet, Norgil was inviting a committee on the stage to view his most sensational illusion—the Lady and the Lion. He studied the committee members as they arrived.

There was one whose looks Norgil didn't like; the fellow was scrawny and pasty-faced. The rest of the committee was all right; one trouble maker wouldn't matter, not with assistants on the alert. Pointing the visitors to the chairs, Norgil turned to introduce Miriam.

The girl looked frail, as well as shapely, in the garb of sparkling jewels that she had worn beneath the Pierrot costume. She seemed smaller without the fluffy clothes, and shorter, too, because she had no shoes. Her face was grim, her lips tight-pressed; but that was part of the act.

Concerned with his own problems, Norgil did not realize how much Miriam had to tell him, how anxious she was to speak. But, like Norgil, she was biding her time, sure that opportunity would soon arrive. Without a word, Miriam entered the huge draped cabinet.

Assistants tightened the curtains and pushed away the stepladders. The audience was breathless; but there was a stir among the committee members. Such was common; for they were always nervous, particularly when Norgil aimed his gun at the big cabinet.

Norgil heard one man give a gasp; another, a frantic shout that sounded like "Hutt!" A chair was overturned, just as Norgil fired. But the clatter of the chair, the crash-bang of the orchestra, was as nothing compared to the terrific smash that came from the cabinet itself.

The great contrivance quivered, while the assistants were yanking at the cords. Rattling, it seemed to shake the falling curtains from its sides. Shrieks rose from the audience, as they saw the cage—with the lion in it.

Tongo had made a terrific leap clear across the cage. He was raging, his roars sounded like bellows as he tried to tear his way through the latched door. From a powerful though tractable beast, the lion had become a fierce jungle killer, behaving with a maddened zeal that Norgil had never seen him display.

Norgil was no lion tamer, but he had to avert a panic. Already the committeemen were diving for the audience, needing no encouragement. People were scrambling from their seats; others, screaming in the aisles. Leaping for the cage, Norgil grabbed the big door handle with his left hand, to prevent it from bouncing loose. With his right, he thrust the revolver toward Tongo's wide spread jaws and fired a blank shot.

THE lion dropped back, subdued, one big paw covering his face in an almost comical fashion. The tension was temporarily relieved; then from the audience, came frantic shouts:

"The lady! The lady!"

Norgil turned toward the other side of the stage, pointing his gun at the forgotten framework where the assistants had lowered the spring blinds. He fired; the blinds whizzed upward. Miriam emerged from the glass box, to reach the stage and take her bow.

The audience kept up the applause until finally Miriam found herself wondering what it was all about. The curtains had closed. Norgil was out by the footlights, receiving plaudits that seemed to rock the house. Looking about, Miriam saw assistants wheeling the lion's cage to its corner, past Norgil's dressing room. They were handling the cage gingerly, shaking their heads as they gazed at Tongo, who sat viewing them with a sphinx-like pose.

Forgetting her kimono and slippers, Miriam pattered barefooted across the stage, to find out the trouble. The assistants were gone when she reached the cage; they didn't seem to like Tongo. But, to Miriam, the lion looked as gentle as ever; she was talking to him, coaxingly, when a last rally of applause reminded her that she had much to tell Norgil.

Turning, Miriam saw the magician going toward his dressing room. Tripping in his direction, Miriam called quickly. Norgil heard her; swung about, and came toward the lion's cage. Meeting her half way, Norgil began to talk, before Miriam had a chance.

"Tongo went beserk," he told her. "If the illusion worked the way these wise birds think it does, you'd have been a goner, Miriam. Tongo was on the jump before the curtains dropped."

"But... but—"

"Fortunately," interposed Norgil, not realizing that Miriam wanted to bring up another subject, "you reached the glass box before Tongo appeared; not afterward, as people figure it. So you were safe enough; and yet—"

He paused, rubbing his chin. Miriam found her chance to talk.

"Crooks are after you!" she warned. "I heard them talking in a box—"

"Trip Shavey and his mob?"

"I think so. There was a man named Geek with them; his name was the only one I heard."

The name gave Norgil a linking thought. Quickly, he questioned:

"Did you see this fellow called Geek?"

"Yes," replied Miriam. "He was little, and his face was ugly; it must have been very white, or pasty, for I could see it, although the light wasn't very good."

THE link was complete in Norgil's mind. Geek was the unsavory member of the committee. Chafing because he hadn't guessed the whole thing earlier, Norgil scarcely realized that Miriam was telling him other facts. At last, he caught her repeated words.

"You've got something that they want," insisted Miram. "A package, in your dressing room. They're going to grab you in the alley, and from the way they talked they mean murder. Jerry, the man at the stage door, is working with them. He will signal them when they have their chance."

Norgil smiled.

"Thanks for the details," he said. "Particularly regarding Jerry. I hadn't exactly figured that he was in it. But don't worry, Miriam. I didn't intend to go out through that alley."

"Then there's no danger?"

"No danger," began Norgil, only to pause, with a frown. "No danger, unless—"

He turned toward the dressing room, too late. A snarly voice was interrupting, as he swung about. Miriam withheld a scream as she saw Trip Shavey standing with a drawn gun, his mob sneaking up behind him. With a deft twist, Norgil caught Miriam, whipped her under one protecting arm as he yanked out a gun to match Trip's.

Mobbies dived for cover among boxes and other props; if Trip had done the same, Norgil would have managed an escape, with Miriam. But Trip didn't budge. Coolly, he kept Norgil covered by shifting his gun muzzles.

"That rod's no good," sneered Trip. "I saw you singe the lion's whiskers with it. Come on, guys, move in. Norgil only has a load of blanks."

Miriam's eyes went shut. Firmly snuggled in Norgil's clasp, she wondered why Trip and his crew didn't shoot. Norgil evidently knew why, for he remained quite calm. Trip's next words explained the situation.

"We don't want any fireworks," declared the crook. "But if you start them, Norgil, we'll follow through. It will be curtains for you and the dame if you shoot any blanks to bring your crowd around here. We'll make a getaway—but you two won't!

"If you hand over that gat, nice and quiet, we'll talk terms. You'll have to come along with us, but we'll treat you easy, both of you. We're not after you"—his tone was emphatic—"we're after dough. So how about it?"

Hesitatingly, Norgil drew back a few steps; then, as Trip and the mob shoved closer, he let the stage revolver dangle from his fingers, so that Trip could take it. The big shot accepted the gun with a wise nod.

"Now you're showing sense," he said, approvingly. "A lot of sense, Norgil."

Behind that statement, Trip hid a smirk; one, however, that Norgil could detect. Trip felt that he had clinched the game; that he had talked Norgil into signing a double death warrant for himself and Miriam.

But there was another angle to the game—one that Trip had practically forgotten. Behind pretended surrender Norgil was harboring a scheme that promised triumph, even against the odds that now surrounded him!

CHAPTER V

NORGIL'S RESCUER

It was still a perfect setup, as Trip Shavey saw it. His original plan was to nab Norgil in the crooked alley, when the magician started out to keep his rendezvous with Mervin Lorne. If Tongo had finished Miriam, Trip could have gone through with the scheme.

So, at least, Trip thought. At present, he intended to eventually work it as planned. Once Norgil and Miriam were on their way out through the alley, they would find treachery, not safety. Shots out there would not matter; not with cars waiting for a quick getaway.

But Trip had a matter to attend to, first.

"The keys come next," he told Norgil. "We want to get into your dressing room, so you just hand them over."

Again Norgil hesitated, drawing back. Trip didn't mind. Norgil couldn't go beyond the lion's cage, and the farther he withdrew toward the corner, the less chance there would be of anyone observing the one-sided scene.

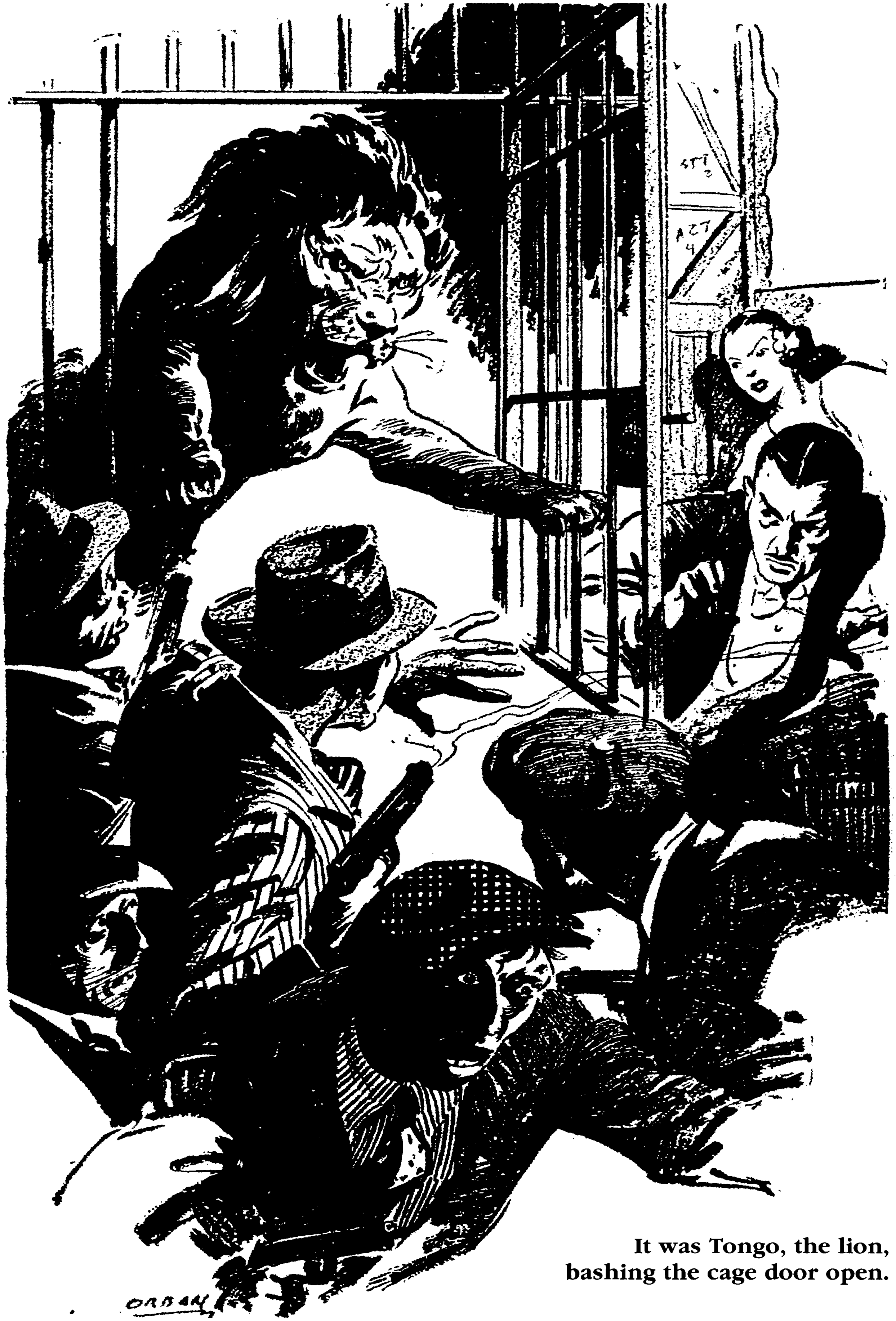
The crooks drew closer, threatening with their guns. In fumbling, nervous fashion, Norgil, produced the keys and let Trip take them. The big shot handed the keys to Geek, told the scrawny crook to unlock the dressing room and bring out the metal suitcase that he found there.

While Geek was following orders, Norgil found himself back against the cage. His left arm still encircled Miriam; he could feel her tremble as his hand pressed her side between the strips of girdling spangles. But it was eagerness, not fear that made her quiver.

Miriam mistrusted Trip's promise, but felt that Norgil did, too. She was confident that the magician could find some way out of this hideous dilemma. Trip didn't share the opinion. He was watching Norgil's right arm, which was half lifted. He saw the arm waver, sink wearily upon the door handle of the lion's cage, which served as a rest for Norgil's tired elbow.

Somewhat contemptuously, Trip let his gun hand relax, to keep Norgil sold on the false promise. The crooks who were shouldering close beside Trip copied their leader's example. It was just as Norgil wanted it.

Suddenly stiffening, Norgil drove his right elbow downward, slashing the door handle with it. His left arm, flinging wide, carried Miriam with its



It was Tongo, the lion, bashing the cage door open.

plucking hand, sent the girl tumbling from danger. With a forward dive below the muzzles of the covering guns, Norgil yelled: "Hutt!"

Crooks fired, their first shots an instant too late to wing the diving magician. Another tug at their triggers and they would have riddled him and Miriam as well, but their chance never came. Instead, they were greeted by a tawny avalanche that weighed at least a quarter of a ton.

It was Tongo, bashing the cage door wide ahead of him, as he made a ferocious, twelve-foot spring. All claws and teeth, the powerful lion was leaping for human prey. Norgil had flattened, short of the gigantic leap, but Tongo had all the target that he needed.

The lion was aiming for five men at once—Trip, and the four mobbies who clustered close to him. They were coming up with their guns, but they might as well have wagged reproving fingers. Tongo hit them with the force of a hurricane before their revolvers could blast.

FROM where she had somersaulted among the boxes, Miriam propped herself on bare knees and elbows, a lone witness to the startling scene, for Norgil was rolling back beneath the lion's cage. Tongo had flattened Trip and two others with his tremendous surge; he was pawing at the pair who were trying to escape, bringing them back, alive.

That didn't help Trip and the shrieking crooks who were sprawled beside him. Tongo's hind paws were wiping them like doormats, and he wasn't sparing with the claws. When it came to cleaning up a mob at close range, Tongo could have given pointers to a squad of Feds.

There were others, though, more distant. Geek was coming from the office, bringing the metal suitcase. Jerry joined him, from the stage door. Both had guns, and were aiming for the victorious lion. Right then Norgil returned Tongo's favor.

Out from beneath the cage the magician scooped up a gun that one of Trip's men had dropped. Shooting past Tongo, he clipped Geek and Jerry in their tracks. Only Geek managed to stagger away; the steel suitcase had deflected some of Norgil's bullets. But Geek did not travel far.

Grabbed by Norgil's assistants and members of the stage crew, the crook flung the box into the alley. There, two waiting men scooped it up, only to be blocked off by police, who arrived unexpectedly, in response to the gunfire. Norgil saw that capture, as he neared the door. Roars from behind him warned him of a last danger.

Crooks were settled; the one problem was Tongo. The rampant lion had left five cripples in his wake, and was coming after more. Flinging aside his revolver, Norgil grabbed for another lying on the floor; one he recognized. Beating Tongo to the spot by a scant margin, Nogril provided the only antidote—blank shots from the stage revolver.

The rescuer didn't want to quit; but he changed his mind, under the blank barrage. Norgil was wishing he had more cartridges, when Miriam took over. The girl arrived with a broom and smacked Tongo on the nose to encourage his retreat. Perhaps her costume, or comparative lack of one, reminded Tongo of the natives who had subdued him in the jungle, for he yielded to the girl's persuasion.

Backed against the cage, Tongo turned about, gave a clumpy hop into his roost. His last argument was a regretful snarl, that came when Miriam clanged the door and snapped the heavy handle into place.

The police were dragging two captives into the light. Norgil stepped up to face Mervin Lorne and the private detective, Blissop. Holding the metal suitcase, Lorne pleaded with Norgil to explain matters. Coolly, Norgil waited until another man arrived—the theater manager, Harvey Belker.

Like Lorne, Belker was carrying a heavy suitcase. He started to shake hands with Norgil.

"I found your note," declared Belker. "These police are my escort. I had them turn about, as you suggested."

"I have another suggestion," offered Norgil. "Open the suitcase, Belker."

Belker opened it, brought out packages of cash. The police examined them, found them to be the theater funds.

"Quite simple, wasn't it?" queried Norgil, turning to Lorne. "Your phony game sounded too good, Lorne, so I didn't switch the suitcases at all. Suppose you open yours."

LORNE refused. Norgil turned to Blissop, who was standing stupefied.

"You probably know the combination," said Norgil. "You open it, before I make you show your fake credentials. There's no use bluffing, Blissop. That derby hat won't keep you from being labeled as a member of Trip's mob."

Mouthing that all the blame belonged to Lorne, Blissop took the second suitcase and unlocked it. Inside, the police found the stolen bank funds, recognizable by their printed bands.

"A very nice plan," explained Norgil. "Lorne was the brain behind the racket; but he hadn't figured out a way for Trip to get into Belker's office and grab the theater funds. So he saved that for the last job.

"I was to pull the job, without knowing it, by switching the suitcases. Trip and his mob were set to rub me out and take the suitcase with the theater money. A phone call to Pittsford would have led to Belker's arrest. A nice spot for you, Belker"—

Norgil turned to the theater manager—"to be found with the stolen bank funds in your possession.

"Lorne didn't want that money; it was too hot. So he figured you'd make a perfect goat. The law would be pleased because it had caught the brain, even though Trip and company would be gone, to permanent safety."

The police took Lorne and Blissop away, along with the evidence captured in Lorne's own possession. Ambulance crews arrived to carry out Trip Shavey and his followers; or, more exactly, what Tongo had left of them. It was afterward that Norgil went to Belker's office, accompanied by Miriam, who had changed to natty street attire.

Belker proved very humble.

"Considering the raw deal I tried to hand you," he said, "it's a wonder that you trusted me, Norgil."

"That's still puzzling Lorne," laughed Norgil, "but the question answers itself."

"Just how?"

"No big brain would have tried to chisel, even in a partly legitimate way. Not with a whole campaign of crime at stake. You proved yourself small, Belker, and that was why I reasoned that Lorne was big."

Taking the censure almost gladly, Belker announced that he was cured, and handed over some good cigars. Then he wanted to know about Tongo; how the lion had served Norgil in the pinch.

"Tongo killed Roxoni," explained Norgil, "but it wasn't Tongo's fault. The lion was trained to leap at a certain cue. Roxoni was drunk, one night, and didn't get clear in time. That's why I said that any circus man would know Tongo."

"And you knew the cue, and—"

"No, I didn't," Norgil admitted. "I never wanted it. But Geek was a sideshow man; his nickname is the term they have for snake-eaters. He happened to know Tongo, and the cue, too."

"That's why he came on stage!" exclaimed Miriam. "He wanted Tongo to trap me in the cage!"

"Yes, but the lady was gone," smiled Norgil, "and only the lion showed up. I heard that cue, and sprang it when I needed it. Of course, Tongo did the rest."

Glancing at his watch, Belker suggested that he call a restaurant and have a dinner sent over to the theater. He emphasized that the party was to be his; the more it cost, the better. Norgil took Belker at his word.

"The first thing on the order," said the magician, "is eleven pounds of beefsteak."

Belker didn't understand. He saw Norgil smile at Miriam, who did.

"Eleven pounds," repeated Norgil. "One pound for the lady, and ten pounds for the lion."

THE END